

## Migrant and Seasonal Workers

### OVERVIEW

Migrant worker communities are at greater risk from disasters than other populations. For example, the Midwestern United States experienced catastrophic flooding in 1993 and left thousands of migrant workers stranded, unable to return to their homes in Texas.<sup>1</sup> Following hurricane Wilma in October of 2005, the Florida harvest was destroyed, and an estimated 71,350 farmworkers suddenly were out of work.<sup>2</sup>

Migrant workers are individuals or families who travel seasonally for work, usually farm jobs that are crucial to the U.S. agricultural sector. The National Center for Migrant Health estimates that between 3 and 5 million people in the U.S. fall into this category. Approximately 85% are minorities, including Mexicans and Central Americans, Black Americans, Haitians, Thais, Laotians and other ethnic minorities and immigrants.<sup>3</sup> About 80% of migrant workers are men; their average age is 29. Most migrant workers live below the poverty line.<sup>4</sup>



The circumstances in which migrant workers live create numerous challenges for disaster preparedness and response such as geographic isolation, [language and cultural barriers](#), residential and employment transience, substandard housing, [limited vehicular mobility](#), low income, and sometimes [uncertain immigration status](#). Some issues unique to migrant populations are described below.

#### *Geographic isolation*

- Less well-developed public infrastructure in rural localities. Lack of Internet connectivity at seasonal worksites reduces communication before and during a disaster.
- Emergency response tools designed for cities or more densely populated regions may not be useful at seasonal worksites.
- Shortages of health care providers in rural areas create very low capacity for response in case of a “surge” of need for services during a disaster.
- Dispersed leadership and weak government in remote areas can create difficulties in forming viable community partnerships.
- Reduced access to public transportation may inhibit evacuation.

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<sup>1</sup> Shepard, Josh. “Why do Farmworkers Need an Emergency Preparedness Plan?” National Center for Farmworker Health, Inc. newsletter, Migrant Health Newslines, Vol. 25, No. 4, July/August 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Sologaistoa, Erin. “The Effects of Natural Disasters on Farmworkers.” Farmworker Health Services, Inc. newsletter, Volume 5, Issue 2, March 2006.

<sup>3</sup> National Center for Farmworker Health, Inc. “Overview of America’s Farmworkers.” Accessed on October 16, 2008 at [http://www.ncfh.org/aaf\\_01.php](http://www.ncfh.org/aaf_01.php).

<sup>4</sup> American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. “Communication Facts: Special Populations: Migrant Workers in the United States - 2008 Edition.” Accessed on October 16, 2008 at [http://www.asha.org/members/research/reports/migrant\\_workers.htm](http://www.asha.org/members/research/reports/migrant_workers.htm).

## WHEN DISASTER STRIKES: PROMISING PRACTICES

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### *Risks from Housing and Employment*

- Mobile or temporary housing is at greater risk of being destroyed by severe weather. If the disaster destroys the season's farm harvest, workers have a potential shortage or loss of employment.
- Migrant populations are less likely to stockpile emergency food, water, and supplies due to lack of income or transiency.

### *Cultural Differences and Immigration Status*

- Misunderstandings can occur about which disaster services undocumented immigrants are legally eligible for. Both the migrant community and emergency response personnel can misinterpret eligibility requirements for disaster assistance.
- Ineligibility to obtain driver's licenses may impede migrants' ability to evacuate.

## RELATED TOPICS

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## STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING BARRIERS

Effective strategies for reducing vulnerability to disasters among migrant workers requires a combination of approaches including improving communication, increasing the cultural competence of response organizations, and fostering community partnerships with existing migrant worker health and service organizations. Strategies for increasing cultural competence, including overcoming language and cultural barriers, are described in other sections of this document. The guidelines below focus on issues unique to migrant worker populations that should be addressed in order to improve this population's capacity for safe evacuation or sheltering during a disaster.



- Overcome misconceptions about migrant rights. Ensure that emergency personnel and responders are aware of immigrants' rights and service eligibilities during disasters, including undocumented immigrants' eligibility for non-cash disaster relief.
- Promote outreach and education efforts to inform migrant workers of their rights to disaster relief services.
- Collaborate with community organizations that work with migrant populations:
  - Identify and make contact with organizations that already work with migrant communities, such as local migrant health offices.
  - Develop communication plans with input from representatives of migrant populations to convey information to the community.
  - Nongovernmental service providers should create disaster management plans.

### PROFILES

<b>Program:</b>	Farmworker Association of Florida – Disaster Response and Relief
<b>Organization:</b>	Farmworker Association of Florida, Inc. (FWAF)
<b>Keywords:</b>	migrant workers, cultural competence, community partnerships
<b>Source:</b>	<a href="http://floridafarmworkers.org/disaster_response.html">http://floridafarmworkers.org/disaster_response.html</a>
<b>Brief Summary:</b>	FWAF is a grassroots, community-based organization with a mission to build power among farmworkers and rural, low-income communities to respond to and gain control over the social, political, workplace, economic, health, and environmental justice issues that impact their lives. Through their Disaster Response and Relief program, FWAF helps farmworker communities throughout Central and South Florida prepare for natural disasters, such as hurricanes, tornadoes, and flooding, through outreach and community education.

The FWAF's strategy is to empower farmworkers to be effective agents of social and personal change. FWAF has five offices and over 8,000 member families in thirteen counties throughout Central and South Florida.

One of FWAF's program areas is Disaster Relief and Response. This program helps farmworker communities prepare for natural disasters, such as hurricanes, tornadoes, and flooding, through outreach and community education.

Specific activities carried out by FWAF Disaster Relief and Response include:

- Organizing community members and community groups to respond to farmworker areas impacted by natural disasters;
- Coordinating food, water, and household item distribution activities in conjunction with local community groups;
- Conducting outreach and education about resources and assistance available to help community members rebuild their lives and homes after disasters.;
- Working with federal and state disaster response agencies to ensure that those organizations provide assistance to farmworker and rural communities (for example, FWAF is seeking to improve FEMA's emergency housing activities to allow undocumented immigrants to access services in accordance with Federal law).

FWAF provides an example of a nongovernmental organization that can serve as a cultural broker by providing outreach and education to migrant communities, and can also help to coordinate response and relief services in the event of a disaster. They serve as both a model for how NGOs can incorporate emergency management activities into their core missions, and also as an example of the type of organization with which government agencies may partner to provide emergency management services to vulnerable migrant populations.

## WHEN DISASTER STRIKES: PROMISING PRACTICES

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<b>Program:</b>	Communicating the Risks of Bioterrorism and Other Emergencies in a Diverse Society: A Case Study of Special Populations in North Dakota
<b>Organization:</b>	North Dakota Department of Health.
<b>Keywords:</b>	cultural competence, migrant workers, communication plan, risk communication, special populations
<b>Source:</b>	McGough, M., et. al. (2005). "Communicating the Risks of Bioterrorism and Other Emergencies in a Diverse Society: A Case Study of Special Populations in North Dakota." <i>Biosecurity and Bioterrorism: Biodefense Strategy, Practice, and Science</i> , Volume 3, Number 3, 2005. [PDF]. Accessible online at <a href="http://www.nphic.org/pdffiles/Journal%20Article%20final.pdf">http://www.nphic.org/pdffiles/Journal%20Article%20final.pdf</a> as of October 17, 2008
<b>Brief Summary:</b>	The article summarizes the major findings of a Special Populations Study conducted for the North Dakota Department of Health (NDDH) by the Consortium for Risk and Crisis Communications "to develop communications strategies to reach special populations in North Dakota before, during, and after a bioterrorism attack or other crisis." The study highlights an initiative of the North Dakota Health Department to convene an advisory committee representing "special populations," including migrant farmworkers and other groups that do not traditionally access information through local media.

The investigators completed telephone interviews and telephone focus groups nonprofit organizations that represent special populations, including migrant farmworkers, Native Americans, refugees, senior citizens, and others. The interviews addressed these populations' attitudes and concerns about crises, sources of information used, information sources identified as most credible, methods to reach people during a crisis event, and awareness of and attitudes about the agencies and organizations that affect risk communications.

In addition to identifying numerous obstacles to communication about emergencies with these populations, the study identified activities undertaken by the North Dakota Department of Health to address the findings and implement recommendations, including:

- Convening a committee with representatives of "special populations" to develop guidelines for communication with these groups;
- Identifying contacts at the state and local level that work with special populations;
- Developing procedures for communicating emergency messages to these groups.

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<b>Program:</b>	Farmworker Justice Occupational Safety Program – Disaster Preparedness Brochures
<b>Organization:</b>	Farmworker Justice.
<b>Keywords:</b>	Family disaster planning, migrant workers, printed information, immigrants.
<b>Source:</b>	Farmworker Justice Occupational Safety Program <a href="http://www.harvestingjustice.org/index.php/occupational-safety">http://www.harvestingjustice.org/index.php/occupational-safety</a>
<b>Brief Summary:</b>	Farmworker Justice, a nationwide nonprofit, offers printed materials that describe issues pertinent to migrant workers about emergency access to food, housing, and disaster-related unemployment resources. The three printable brochures are offered in English and Spanish and are tailored toward describing eligibility requirements for access to disaster services.

Farmworker Justice's activities include monitoring legislation that affects farmworkers, and providing leadership training and education to farmworkers on issues including health and safety and guest workers' rights.

One of the goals of their Occupational Safety Program is to make emergency preparedness measures more accessible. They offer printed and printable brochures in English and Spanish that answer questions such as: "Do you know what to do in case of a natural disaster?" and "Where to go for assistance with food, housing, unemployment insurance?" and "How does your immigration status affect your access to these things?" and "Does not having your papers mean you're on your own?"

The information in these brochures specifically addresses the eligibility requirements for individuals seeking access to food, housing and disaster-related unemployment services. This approach makes the information pertinent to migrant workers whose immigration status may vary from case to case and who may have questions about which services they are eligible for.

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## WHEN DISASTER STRIKES: PROMISING PRACTICES

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**Program:** Migrant Health and Safety Fair for Children  
**Organization:** Eastern Shore Rural Health Center, Inc.  
**Keywords:** Migrant workers, nonprofits, disaster preparedness education, community outreach, children  
**Source:** Farmworker Health Services, Inc. "Innovative Outreach Practice Report 2008." <http://www.farmworkerhealth.org/emergencypreparedness.html>  
**Brief Summary:** Eastern Shore Rural Health System, Inc. (ESRHS) partners with local schools to provide a Migrant Health and Safety Fair each summer for children ages 3 to 16. The trainings include information on how to avoid potentially dangerous situations, how to respond in an emergency, and help to increase the children's confidence in rescue personnel.

Each summer, the Eastern Shore Rural Health System, Inc. (ESRHS) partners with local schools to provide a Migrant Health and Safety Fair for children ages 3 to 16. In addition to learning about issues like pedestrian safety, hygiene, and the risks of smoking, children also receive basic training in emergency preparedness.

The fair aims to increase children's confidence in rescue personnel, considering that migrant families may fear law enforcement officials due to their legal status.

ESRHS is a federally qualified community health center. It runs five medical centers along the Eastern Shore from Chincoteague Island to Cape Charles. In addition to providing primary medical and dental care, ESRHS offers pharmacy assistance, health education, and interpretation services at no cost to patients.

The Migrant Children Health and Safety Fair demonstrates how official institutions such as local schools can collaborate with nonprofits, and how health-related NGOs can incorporate disaster preparedness education for migrant families into their regular mission and activities.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

**"Developing a Farmworker Disaster Plan: A Guide for Service Providers."** By Beth Outtersen, et. al. (1994). The Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs: Arlington, VA. Accessible online at: [http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content\\_storage\\_01/0000019b/80/16/1a/e2.pdf](http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/16/1a/e2.pdf)

***Migrant Health Newslines*, Vol. 25, No. 4, July/August 2008.** (This issue of the newsletter of the National Center for Farmworker Health, Inc. is entirely devoted to Disaster Preparedness and Response in migrant communities. Numerous additional resources are listed in the newsletter.) Accessible online at: <http://ncfh.org/newslines/08-0708.pdf>