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GAO

United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

Human Resources Division

B-248170

April 10, 1992



146351

The Honorable Vic Fazio
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Fazio:

As requested by your staff, this letter summarizes our recent reports and testimony related to migrant and seasonal farmworkers. As you know, one of your constituents has expressed concern about the adequacy of federal, state, and local programs that serve migrant and seasonal farmworkers and the availability of data for effectively administering these programs and formulating farm labor policy.

Our February 1992 report and our testimony given last year provide information on the extent to which federal laws, regulations, and programs protect the health and well-being of farmworkers, many of whom are migrant and seasonal.¹ Information that relates to your constituent's specific concerns follows:

- Federal programs that serve the general population or workers in general do not provide assistance to many farmworkers. For example, many, particularly migrant and seasonal farmworkers, do not receive medical assistance from Medicaid because of eligibility and administrative requirements. Also, farmworkers are more likely than workers in other occupations to receive fewer Social Security benefits because their employers do not report all their earnings. Some farmworkers do not receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) because they are unaware of the SSI program or their potential eligibility. Farmworker advocacy groups as well as agricultural employer representatives said the principal federal job placement program--the Department of Labor's Employment Service--is not as effective as it should be in helping farmworkers find jobs.

¹Farmworkers Face Gaps in Protection and Barriers to Benefits (GAO/T-HRD-91-40, July 17, 1991) and Hired Farmworkers: Health and Well-Being at Risk (GAO/HRD-92-46, Feb. 14, 1992).

GAO/HRD-92-30R, Summary Information on Farmworkers

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- Because of limited funds, federal programs that primarily serve farmworkers do not provide assistance to many of them. The Department of Health and Human Services estimates that budget constraints limit the Migrant Health Program to providing medical services to less than 15 percent of migrant and seasonal farmworkers. Federal funding to construct and rehabilitate farmworker housing has been cut substantially over the past decade, and most states do not offer financial assistance for the development of farmworker housing. Funds for the principal federal training program for migrant and seasonal farmworkers are insufficient to serve all those eligible.
- Federal regulation of pesticides, workplace conditions, and child labor do not adequately protect farmworkers' health and well-being. Federal laws and regulations do not (1) ensure that farmworkers are given sufficient information about pesticide hazards, (2) require that small farms provide drinking water, handwashing facilities, and toilets, and (3) specify the same age restrictions for children who work in agriculture as those for children in other occupations.
- Data on farmworkers are limited. Estimates of the size of the farmworker population and the subpopulation of migrant and seasonal farmworkers vary. Some data on the ethnic composition, average earnings, and average education of migrant and seasonal farmworkers are available. However, reliable national data on farmworkers' health problems--including pesticide poisonings, mortality rates, and other issues affecting farmworkers--are unavailable.

In 1989 we reported on the possible effect of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986² on the availability of farm labor on the West Coast. Although our primary message was that no farm labor shortage was likely on the West Coast in 1989, the report contained other information that relates to your constituent's request. Specifically, in 1988, the supply of adequate farmworker housing fell far short of demand, and public financial assistance for housing repair and construction was inadequate. The report also underscored a lack of data on the number of migrant and seasonal farmworkers on the West Coast.

²Immigration Reform: Potential Impact on West Coast Farm Labor (GAO/HRD-89-89, Aug. 17, 1989).

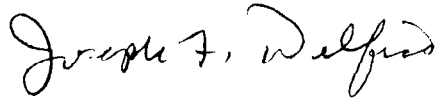
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In 1990 we reported on the activities of Legal Services Corporation (LSC) grantees that represent migrant and seasonal farmworkers.³ That report includes information from grantee attorneys on violations of law frequently cited by migrant and seasonal farmworkers in disputes with agricultural employers. Violations include employers' failure to (1) pay wages for all hours worked, (2) pay wages promptly, and (3) pay minimum wage rates.

Currently, at the request of the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, our Program Evaluation and Methodology Division is studying the extent to which government programs and regulations protect farmers and farmworkers from unnecessary pesticide risks. We will send you any reports that result from this work.

If you or your staff have any questions concerning this letter, please contact me on (202) 512-7215. Major contributors are Robert L. MacLafferty, Assistant Director, and Ann Lee, Evaluator-in-Charge, of our San Francisco Regional Office.

Sincerely yours,



Joseph F. Delfico
Director, Income Security Issues

Enclosures

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³Legal Services Corporation: Grantee Attorneys' Handling of Migrant Farmworker Disputes With Growers (GAO/HRD-90-144, Sept. 24, 1990).