

# **HEALTH ISSUES FACING FARMWORKERS SERVED BY RURAL OPPORTUNITIES, INC.**

**March 28, 2000**

## **THE ISSUE:**

Rural Opportunities, Inc. (ROI) has provided health related services to farmworkers since its inception in 1969. Health related services include: outreach and education projects that address issues related to workplace safety, appropriate ways to manage exposure to pesticides, and effective strategies to prevent workplace injuries. Personal and family health related issues such as: the high incidence of infant mortality, domestic and community violence, exposure to sexually transmitted diseases, the importance of annual physicals and access to quality prenatal care, are regularly addressed through innovative, prevention based curriculums that are implemented through trained peer educators who come from the farmworker community. Chronic health issues such as mental health, alcohol and drug addictions can not be adequately addressed due to the lack of resources.

ROI's experience has clearly demonstrated that the health related issues described above are significant problems within the farmworker community. These problems have solutions. With proper intervention, adequate resources, and competent leadership ROI has demonstrated that health related problems can be significantly reduced. There is a direct connection between improved work productivity and reduced health-related problems. Investment in effective community-based outreach and educational services creates opportunities to improve individual, family and community health and thereby positively impacts employment, success in education, general family well-being, and health outcomes.

## **ROI's RECOMMENDATIONS:**

ROI continually advocates for the following public health-related intervention strategies:

- institutional change to guarantee that community health care education and services reach farmworkers
- health related regulations recognizing the unique living and working conditions of farmworkers
- access to affordable health care and health insurance.
- access to safe, healthy, and affordable housing
- increase research on how health-related problems impact the lives of farmworkers.

The above intervention strategies are all essential to effectively improve the health of farmworkers and their families. We have outlined our specific recommendations to Congress on improving the access and quality of health care to farmworkers in the attached position paper.

## **A. Background**

Rural Opportunities, Inc. (ROI) has provided health related services to farmworkers since its inception in 1969. Health related services include: outreach and education projects that address issues related to workplace safety, appropriate ways to manage exposure to pesticides, and effective strategies to prevent workplace injuries. Personal and family health related issues such as: the high incidence of infant mortality, domestic and community violence, exposure to sexually transmitted diseases, the importance of annual physicals and access to quality prenatal care, are regularly addressed through innovative, prevention-based curriculum that are implemented through trained peer educators who come from the farmworker community. Chronic health issues such as mental health, alcohol and drug addictions can not be adequately addressed due to the lack of resources. When possible individuals with chronic health problems are referred to competent professionals in the community, however, staff, education and training resources are not currently available to focus on these long-term health issues.

ROI's experience has clearly demonstrated that the health related issues described above are significant problems within the farmworker community. These problems have solutions. With proper intervention, adequate resources, and competent leadership ROI has demonstrated that health related problems can be significantly reduced. There is a direct connection between improved work productivity and reduced health-related problems. Investment in effective community-based outreach and educational services creates opportunities to improve individual, family and community health and thereby positively impacts employment, success in education, general family well-being and health outcomes.

## **B. ROI's Intervention Strategies**

The following intervention strategies instituted by ROI have a proven track record for improving individual and family health:

- Practical, community-based educational instruction on how to safely deal with workplace safety issues such as interactive curriculum that addresses prevention of employment related injuries and reducing exposure to dangerous chemicals immediately impact worker practices. Through interactive classes led by trained peer educators and supported by ROI professional experts, vital information is effectively delivered.

- Individualized, confidential supportive counseling offered in the native language of participants by trained counselors, recruited from the farmworker community, creates the trust and confidence required to help families who are struggling with domestic violence, sexually transmitted diseases, malnutrition, and other nutritional issues.

- The creation of affordable, safe, sanitary seasonal and year-round housing directly impacts the health of farmworkers. ROI has built and rehabilitated hundreds of units of housing for farmworkers and their employers.

-ROI continually advocates for the following public health-related intervention strategies; institutional change to guarantee that community health care services reach farmworkers; for health related regulations that recognize the unique living and working conditions of farmworkers; for access to affordable health care and health insurance, are all essential to effectively improve the health of farmworkers and their families. Decisions made by publicly elected officials directly impact the quality and availability of health related services to impoverished people such as farmworkers.

Rural Opportunities Inc. has had thousands of encounters with farmworkers concerned in one way or another about their health and that of their family. The following recommendations summarize the steps that Congress could take to address the health problems documented in these encounters.

### **C. Recommendations:**

Congress should encourage H. H. S. to increase funds for community based organizations to conduct outreach services to farmworkers. Effective outreach services are delivered by peers from their community, who are trained to provide health education. They focus on: how to prevent workplace injuries, how to safely work with pesticides, how to prevent exposure to diseases, the dissemination of information on appropriate pre-natal care, how to live healthy lifestyles, and how to deal with serious problems such as AIDS and domestic violence. A supportive counseling and case management model is employed. Classes take place in locations where farmworkers live and a referral system is established that directs participants to appropriate health care providers to address the above health issues.

Congress should encourage H. H. S. to designate funds and establish a program to be administered by community-based organizations, designed to support outreach services that focus on mental health and substance abuse problems utilizing the peer education model described above. Federal funds should be targeted directly to organizations serving farmworkers.

Congress should create an affordable primary health care insurance product that could be purchased by employers of seasonally employed farmworkers. This health care insurance would be structured so that farmworkers could access health care services from established providers regardless of geographic location and employment status. Farmworkers often experience under employment. They often move from state to state seeking employment. With the support from the federal government, personal health insurance could be affordable, available regardless of status of employment and included in required employer sponsored benefits.

Congress should carefully examine and remove all barriers farmworkers experience when they attempt to access many federally funded programs such as Medicaid, Medicare and other health services. Many farmworkers travel throughout the country for employment. They often do not qualify for needed services because these programs have residency and other eligibility requirements that exclude farmworkers who must travel to find employment. Eligibility for

federally funded health services should be portable. If a farmworker is determined eligible in Texas or Florida he/she should be able to carry that approval to New York or Ohio and be able to continue receiving appropriate health services.

Congress should require all employers of agricultural workers, regardless of size of establishment and length of employment, to provide workers compensation and short and long-term disability insurance for all farmworker employees. The current legislation governing mandated workplace benefits excludes many farmworkers. This exclusion prevents many farmworkers from receiving necessary health services and coverage for lost wages when injured on or off the job.

Congress should ensure that employer compliance checks related to worker protection standards are conducted regularly by each state.

Congress should increase funding for the development of affordable year-round and seasonal housing for farmworkers. Many of the health related problems faced by farmworkers is caused from living in dilapidated, unsafe, unsanitary, overcrowded housing. Thousands of farmworkers are often homeless and forced to live in abandoned buildings, cars, tents and parks without adequate sanitation, food storage, cooking facilities and sleeping arrangements. A sanitary, safe, affordable, appropriate size home leads directly to improved health for the entire family living in that home. Current housing conditions faced by many farmworkers is a national disgrace. Immediate action is required.

Congress should direct H. H. S. to evaluate funding formulas used to distribute funds to primary health care centers that offer services to farmworkers. As these centers have expanded services beyond just serving farmworkers certain disincentives have been created that discourage services and programs such as transportation, outreach, bilingual caregivers, dental services, substance abuse services, mental health services, and preventive health education. Farmworkers remain a unique population that requires specialized health services. Primary care providers must be encouraged to design and manage services that are affordable and guaranteed to reach and effectively serve this community.

The Congress should direct the appropriate federal agency to increase research on health related problems impacting the lives of farmworkers. There is a serious lack of information on the unique environmental conditions faced by farmworkers in their workplaces and where they live. These often unsafe and unhealthy environments generate many health problems. Quality of life would improve and many health problems would be eliminated if workers, their employers and health care providers better understood the cause and effect of health problems related to the living and working conditions faced by farmworkers.