

Farmworkers and our communities

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Our communities are enriched each year by the migrant farmworkers and their families who make essential contributions to this nation's agricultural production. Their presence has many positive impacts on the areas where they work.

Migrant farmworkers provide the labor for agriculture, the #1 industry in New York State. Without farmworkers, New York's agricultural industry could not survive. They are indispensable to the system. They provide a labor force for an industry in which both experience and surveys demonstrate that area residents are unwilling to work.

Farmworkers help to preserve a way of life. The rural and agrarian way of life on which our society was founded is sustained through the continuation of our farming communities that depend on farmworkers.

The population of farmworkers and their families stimulate the general economy by increasing the sales of retail stores and private services. Farmworkers are frequent consumers of goods and services within the communities where they work. They purchase and use the same commodities and services as the rest of us, such as food, clothing, housing, utilities, auto essentials, and entertainment.

Farmworkers pay more in taxes than they take out. They pay sales taxes, Social Security, income taxes, and driver's licenses and fees. Though they are required to pay these taxes, as non-residents they are not able to realize many of the benefits.

The diversity afforded our community in general and our school systems in particular by farmworkers and their families, provides us with expanded knowledge and options in viewing the world around us. Having the opportunity to share and explore foreign cultures, and our own through comparison, expands our understanding and problem solving abilities. We have much to learn from one another.

Farmworkers and their families often remind us of some of the values that we as a society seem to have almost forgotten. Family, both nuclear and extended, is a primary value among the majority of farmworkers. Many of them are forced to leave their families behind when they come to work here. Each payday they send money back to their families. The money may go to wives and children, or it may be the children who are working here and sending money to their parents.

Love of community is another strong value that is shared within the migrant population. One group of men from Oaxaca was found to be sending 25% of each of their paychecks back to their hometown to support their community's health clinic. Their support included paying the salary of the clinic's doctor.

Faith and courage are highly observable characteristics among farmworkers. Strong faith is found both in terms of spirituality and organized religion. Faith and courage are required to travel to an often-unknown destination, facing uncertain work and living conditions, with limited or no familiarity with the language, and serious concern about the reception the community will provide upon your arrival. Combined with separation from family and friends, work on isolated farms is a very real source of emotional pain for many workers. Camps are often located far from downtown areas with limited transportation available. Access to telephones for personal calls is limited, and a costly luxury. Use of pay phones is subject to language barriers. Incoming calls are virtually out of the question.

The work ethic exhibited by farmworkers is extraordinary. They often toil 12 to 14 hours a day, 7 days a week during the harvest season. Farm work is both strenuous and dangerous. High heat and humidity are frequently part of the work environment. Stoop labor and heavy containers are also common components of the tasks performed.

Education is valued. Often farmworkers attend English language classes at the end of the long workday. Many families have made tremendous sacrifices to see that their children receive an education.

Most people are unaware that they probably eat something almost every day that has been handled by a migrant farmworker. These diligent laborers help make it possible for us to spend a mere 9% of our per capita income on food—less than any other nation in the world. In addition, they contribute to our economy, enrich our culture, and give our society far more than they take from it. Let us welcome them.

***Note added January 2018:** Many farmworkers now have access to cell phones. Though a few migrant camps are outside the range of cell towers, having the phones has increased communication between family members who are separated by work.

