

Housing, Meals, Transportation

Housing

Migrant housing in South Jersey includes dormitories, trailers, houses, cabins, and motel rooms. Many workers spend the six week blueberry harvest in large dormitories where fifty to one hundred or more workers are housed in each building. The cement-floored dorms are constructed of cinder blocks or have metal walls and roofs. The doors and windows are screened. Some dorms include small lockers where workers can secure valuables.

Regulations require a certain amount of space between bunk beds. For newly constructed migrant housing, the larger dorms must have roll up doors with screens, for ventilation. But there is no provision for fans, air conditioning, or heat.

The beds are narrower than a standard single bed and the mattresses are often of poor quality, in some cases just a two inch sheet of low grade foam rubber which collapses immediately under the weight of even a small person.

On summer evenings, when the sun has been beating down on the metal roof all day, the inside of the dorms will be quite hot. If the temperature drops at night, gradually the dorm will cool down. When it stays hot throughout the night, workers do not get any break at all from the heat. This is physically stressful, especially for older workers.

Workers start their day around five a.m., dressing and preparing food. Those with families get their children ready to catch the school bus at six a.m. for the Migrant Education summer program. The school bus will return the children around seven in the evening. After the children are seen off on the bus, workers begin walking out to the fields, or riding by bus and van if the fields are too far. Many workers carry their noonday meal with them. Typically the work crew does not stop for a meal break, but individual workers take their own breaks.

At the end of the work day, as late as seven or eight p.m., when workers return to the migrant camp, they shower and change. They purchase meals cooked by others or they cook for themselves. The process of showering and cooking is impeded by the necessity for those who are not first in line to wait for enough hot water for showering and for space in the communal kitchens for cooking. When showers and meals are taken care of, if there is still daylight, and even sometimes after dark, workers wash their clothing by hand in outdoor laundry tubs and in buckets. Laundry is hung out to dry. Hot water is provided in the outdoor laundry tubs.

Youth ages 14 to 21, who meet certain criteria, may attend an evening Migrant Education Program four nights a week. These young workers will be first in line for the showers, as they rush to be ready for the bus which drops off the day program students and then picks them up. They will be served dinner at the school where the Migrant Education night classes are held. (Continued next page)

Because of the long hours spent working in the fields, lights go off in the dorms around nine or nine-thirty p.m. Noise dies down. Workers are often so exhausted that they will fall sleep before the lights go out.

Portable toilets are provided in the fields and there are rows of portable toilets not far from the larger dormitories. Smaller housing units may have adequate indoor toilets, but many trailers and small cabins have no indoor toilet and in those places there will be one or two portable toilets nearby. For families who do not want to send their children outdoors in the dark, a bucket is sometimes used as a chamber pot at night. A few of the older workers also use a bucket chamber pot at night. A flashlight may be used to light a path to the portable toilets, but once inside the light is extinguished for privacy because the walls of the portable toilet are translucent.

Hundreds of workers staying in motels do not even get a thin foam pad to sleep on. In a typical motel room with one bed, if seven workers share the room, most of them will sleep on blankets spread on the floor. The blankets are rolled up during the day. Workers have no space to lie down before everyone in the room is ready to retire. There are no regulations about motel room crowding. This may be the result of communities not wanting to discourage families coming to visit the shore. If the grower pays for lodgings, the workers must each have a bed, but if the crew boss is paying for the lodgings these restrictions do not apply. (Continued next page)



English class with dormitories in background

Meals

Most migrant camps have communal kitchens, sometimes more than one if it is a large camp. The cooking facilities may include hot plates or electric fry pans, but more often there are gas ranges. In addition to communal kitchens, some camps have an outdoor grill. Usually the kitchens are quite hot. Because of fire codes, window fans and free-standing fans may not be used in the kitchens; the cost of providing hooded fans over the ranges is prohibitive.

The kitchen will have a full sized refrigerator, and some of the larger dorms also have refrigerators. But there is no way workers can secure food they have bought. It only takes one thief in a camp with hundreds of people, to make life unpleasant for everyone else.

For those staying in motels, some crew bosses will man an outdoor grill in the motel yard, to provide meals. Food trucks come out to migrant camps and occasionally to the motels where workers stay.

At the camps, immigrants eat almost exclusively the foods they are familiar with. Migrant youth who were born in the U.S. or who have attended school here, will have been exposed to school lunches and will eat a wider variety of foods if they are provided.

There are many challenges to getting groceries and preparing meals in a migrant camp. When workers arrive at the migrant camps, they do not receive their first paycheck until after the harvest has begun. Working seven days a week, if they want to get to the grocery store they have to go at night or wait till there is a short work day when they get off a few hours early. They may have to wait for a ride into town, pay for the ride, and after they shop wait again for a ride back to the camp.

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Transportation

Some workers arrive at the migrant camps in South Jersey in commercial buses which are hired to bring them from Florida. Others arrive in farm labor buses and vans driven by crew bosses and their helpers. Only a few migrant workers bring their own vehicles. Some individual workers and some small work crews arrive via public transportation.

Buses and vans are also used to transport workers to the fields and back, and to bring them into town to cash their paychecks, to shop, or to visit the health clinic. These vehicles are quite often old and do not generally have air conditioning. Often, each van or bus must make several round trips to get the whole work crew to the field where they will be picking. If they finish one field, they may be shuttled to the next field to continue working. At the end of the work day vans and buses shuttle the workers back to camp.

The age of buses and vans typically used to transport migrant workers may be a contributing factor in some accidents. Trips into town may be on roads the driver is not familiar with, and the return trip will likely be made after dark. On dark roads out in the country, especially in the Pine Barrens of South Jersey, deer are crossing the highway at the same hour that migrant buses and vans are heading back to the camps after trips into town.



This farm labor bus has passed a mandated annual *Vehicle Mechanical Inspection*, performed by an independent inspection company not affiliated with the applicant and is registered with the Department of Labor, Wage & Hour Division.