

New Jersey growers refuse to test migrant farm workers for COVID-19

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As many as 10,000 migrant workers have come to New Jersey during the past few weeks to pick blueberries and pack them for sale. Many of these workers have arrived after picking fruit under unsafe conditions in Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and other states where the number of novel coronavirus infections is increasing. But a growing number of New Jersey farms are refusing to allow the seasonal workers they have hired to be tested for the virus.

Driven by the demands of creditors, agribusinesses and supermarket chains to quickly harvest the crops, this indifference to the lives of migrant workers will only help spread the coronavirus again in New Jersey.

Agriculture is the third-largest industry in New Jersey. The 2017 Census of Agriculture found that the state had 9,883 farms, which was 800 farms more than in the 2012 census. The value of New Jersey's overall agricultural products was almost \$1.1 billion in 2017, an increase from approximately \$1 billion in 2012.

About 9,000 acres of blueberries were harvested in New Jersey in 2018. These acres yielded 44 million pounds of blueberries, representing a value of \$62.4 million. Approximately 80 percent of New Jersey's blueberries are grown on 56 larger farms in Atlantic County.

In May, the state's Department of Health introduced a program under which federally qualified health centers (FQHCs) would, at no charge to growers, test the migrant workers who harvest fruits and vegetables. But the department made participation in this program voluntary. By refusing to divulge the number of growers who have refused testing, as well as their locations, the department is shielding these growers from public outrage.

Dozens of farmers are refusing to participate, according to residents of agricultural areas who spoke

to NJ Spotlight. Most of these growers are in Cumberland County, and six blueberry growers in Atlantic County have refused testing for their workers.

Cumberland and Atlantic counties have coasts on the Atlantic Ocean and are two of the southernmost counties in New Jersey. They also are among the poorest counties in the state by per capita income. This region of New Jersey, which was itself an early epicenter of the pandemic in the United States, had the largest growth in new coronavirus cases during the three weeks from June 10 to July 1. Between June 24 and July 1, Cumberland County had an increase of 4.7 cases per 10,000 residents, the highest spread of the disease in the state, according to an analysis by NJ Advance Media. Atlantic County had an increase of 4.0 cases per 10,000 residents. Although the rate of increase is lower than it previously was, this trend could change with the arrival of workers who may have been exposed to the virus in other states.

The New Jersey Department of Health has acknowledged growers' refusal to participate in the testing program. "The departments of Health, Agriculture, and Labor and Workforce Development, along with the FQHCs, are working hand in hand to fine tune our outreach efforts to get the best outcomes possible," said spokesperson Nancy Kearney in a written statement. "The state agriculture secretary is sending another letter to farmers, and ... the New Jersey Farm Bureau is also reaching out to farmers to emphasize the importance of workers getting tested."

Kearney did not announce any new legal requirements or penalties for growers who refuse testing. Instead, the state officials will limit themselves to hand wringing and futile appeals to growers' consciences.

In all, 3,900 seasonal farmworkers had been tested as

of July 2. Most of these tested workers were in South Jersey. A total of 193 workers tested positive for the virus, yielding a positive rate of five percent. The positive rate during the previous month was 11.7 percent. The current positive rate could increase, however, with the influx of migrant workers from states where the virus is raging.

A travel advisory that Democratic Governor Phil Murphy issued on June 24 requested all people entering New Jersey from 16 states with high rates of coronavirus positivity to quarantine themselves for 14 days. These states include Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina, where most migrant workers come from to pick blueberries. The number of workers who have quarantined themselves, or indeed whether any workers have done so, is unknown.

In fact, quarantining is all but impossible for these workers, who must work to earn their meager income or starve. They live in overcrowded camps and travel on buses that are packed to capacity. Some farms have few places where workers can wash their hands. Other farms provide no soap, gloves, or masks to their workers, so workers must bring their own supplies from home. Many farms do not enforce social distancing. These conditions, which resemble those that workers face in auto factories and meatpacking plants, encourage the transmission of the virus.

The US government estimates that at least half of farm workers are undocumented immigrants. Thus, many have no health insurance or sick leave. In addition to this barrier to care, the economic crisis is forcing many clinics to scale back services or close entirely for lack of funds.

Conditions for migrant workers in the “Garden State” have long been notorious. Last year, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* wrote: “Every year, thousands of seasonal workers from Mexico, Haiti, Puerto Rico, and elsewhere spend about eight weeks living on the blueberry fields they are hired to pick. The workers are usually housed in large metal structures, called pole barns, meant for storing farm equipment. The barns have windows but lack fire sprinklers and other fire safety measures required of residential facilities. Dozens of bunk beds line each side.”

With consummate cynicism, some growers are portraying their refusal to test workers as a valiant defense of workers’ rights. “Testing is for the worker

to decide; no one can compel someone to be tested,” said Peter Furey, president of the New Jersey Farm Bureau, in an interview with NJ Spotlight. “Besides, there may be other forms of preventive health measures aside from testing being taken. We think education and health information is a prerequisite to the consideration of testing.” Assuming for the sake of argument that growers are providing workers with health information, it makes little difference, if workers in crowded camps without soap or protective gear cannot act on this information.

“This could be a public health disaster,” Dr. Lori Talbot told NJ Spotlight. Dr. Talbot is a physician in private practice in Cumberland County who treats migrant farm laborers. She also is a former FQHC medical director. “The denial of access to workers is outrageous behavior and puts many lives at risk, including the health of the farmer and his or her family themselves. The health centers need to have immediate access to these workers, and the farmers need to get out of the way.”

Various cosmetic guidelines for the safety of the migrant workers during the pandemic have been issued by the Democratic-controlled state agencies, such as the Departments of Agriculture, Labor and Health, but enforcement of social distancing, safe accommodation, transportation and disinfection are left entirely up to employers.



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