

California's Vaccination Plan Needs to Prioritize Farmworkers, Their Families and Agricultural Communities

November 2020



Introduction

California's 800,000 agricultural workers¹ are an essential workforce responsible for sustaining California's \$50 billion agricultural industry and the production of America's fresh food supply. Since the beginning of the pandemic, farmworkers have faced higher exposure to COVID-19 than other workers due to exposure in the fields, in the commute to work, and in extremely overcrowded housing that of their co-workers, families and communities.



Farmworkers fall into many high risk categories for COVID-19 and should be given the highest priority in vaccine distribution when a safe and effective one becomes available. Given the reticence and inability of California's agricultural workers to access the American healthcare system, work needs to begin now to educate farmworker communities and prepare them for the eventual vaccinations that will keep them and their communities safe.



With a large segment of Americans being hesitant to be vaccinated for COVID-19, farmworkers may be more reluctant due to concerns about the cost of vaccines, the need for two vaccinations, and their inherent distrust of the health system and public authorities. In addition, the logistical challenges of transporting, storing and making vaccines available in small, rural and impoverished communities adds to the complexity of reaching farmworkers.



It is incumbent on California to prioritize farmworkers in vaccine distribution and to have a specific plan for reaching agricultural workers and their families, to allow them to make informed decisions about vaccines, free of the well documented barriers to health equity.



¹ Martin PL, B, Akhtar M, Stockton M. How many workers are employed in California agriculture? Calif Agric. 2017;71(1):30–34. doi:10.3733/ca.2016a0011.

State priorities in Vaccination Plan

California's Vaccination Plan (Draft v1.0) envisions three phases in distribution of vaccines. In Phase 1, California will focus its efforts on first vaccinating its critical populations in two subphases including:

- Healthcare personnel likely treating patients with COVID-19 and likely to be exposed to COVID-19 (Phase 1-A)
- People at increased risk for severe illness or death from COVID-19 (Phase 1-B)
- Other essential workers (Phase 1-B).

Phase 2, will focus on vaccinating other critical populations and the general population as well as the remainder of Phase 1 populations. The Plan specifically calls for efforts during Phase 2:

“to improve health equity by focusing on protecting workers at highest risk because they are in jobs that pose inherent challenges to controlling exposure to the virus.

“Improving health equity will also occur by examining the demographic and social factors that contribute to the overall health disparities in California such as racism, income, ageism, English proficiency, lack of access to healthcare, crowded housing, precarious employment, and discrimination related to disabilities, sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity, and immigration status.”

Phase 3 will shift to broad distribution to the entire California population.

As part of the Plan, an Allocation Data Team is identifying, estimating and locating critical populations in California which include, among others:

- essential workers,
- people from racial and ethnic minority groups,
- people living in rural communities, and
- people who are under- or uninsured.

Why farmworkers, their families and communities need priority access to vaccinations

Essential food workers at risk

California's agricultural workers are an essential workforce responsible for food production that sustains the nation. They have had a higher risk of exposure throughout the pandemic due to working conditions in fields and packing facilities, lack of preventive education and PPE, crowded transportation to and from the fields, and over-crowded housing conditions. The promulgation and enforcement of workplace safety standards has been lagging and the systematic reporting of workplace risks and outbreaks has been lacking.

A forthcoming statewide report estimates 15,774 cases of confirmed COVID-19 infections among California's Agricultural Workers of September 19, 2020.² Certainly many more have been diagnosed positive during the two months since the data were collected.

County data show that agricultural workers are far more likely to contract COVID-19 than are other workers. In Monterey County, as of the end of June 2020, workers in the agricultural industry were at least three times as likely to become infected with COVID-19 than other workers.³ Current data from Monterey County's COVID-19 website show that 7.1 percent of farmworkers have tested positive for COVID-19, in contrast to the 2.6 percent of the County population as a whole which has tested positive.⁴

H2A "guest" workers within the farmworker community are at further risk, as their employers control their workplace, transportation and lodging. COVID-19 outbreaks among H2A workers have impacted workers in Santa Barbara County (Rancho Nuevo Harvesting and Alco Harvesting), Monterey County (Elkhorn Packing), Ventura County (Villa Las Brisas, Magaña Services) and Fresno County (Wawona Packing).⁵ In Santa Maria (Santa Barbara County), where a high number of H2A workers reside, farmworkers account for 20 percent of the city's COVID-19 positive cases.⁶

An immigrant Latinx/Indigenous population

California's agricultural workers are almost entirely Latinx/Indigenous (97%), with 95 percent identifying born in Mexico. More than half (56%) do not have authorization to work in the United States. Nearly three out of four (72%) speak English a little or not at all, and only a quarter (27%) have a high school education.⁷ California is home to an estimated 165,000 indigenous farmworkers from Southern Mexico, a majority of whom speak neither English nor Spanish but their indigenous language such as Mixteco, Zapoteco, Triqui, Mixe, Maya, and Purépecha. It is estimated that along the Central Coast, 46% of farmworkers are indigenous.⁸

California's Latinx population has been disproportionately affected by COVID-19. Of those positive COVID-19 California cases for which ethnicity has been determined, 60.6 percent were

² *Draft manuscript: CIRS Research Report. California Farmworkers & COVID-19: Challenging the Public Health System*, Don Villarejo, Ph.D., to be published. There were 7,315 confirmed cases among Agricultural Workers in 11 counties representing all six crop regions of the state, and an average of 170,755 Agricultural Workers employed in those counties each month.

³ Don Villarejo, Ph.D., *Increased Risks and Fewer Jobs: Evidence of California Farmworker Vulnerability During the COVID-19 Pandemic*, California Institute for Rural Studies, Inc., July 25, 2020

⁴ www.co.monterey.ca.us/government/departments-a-h/health/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-COVID-19/2019-novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-local-data-10219. There were 2,681 positive COVID-19 cases among the 37,700 agricultural workers, and 11,419 cases out of a total population of 434,061.

⁵ <https://calmatters.org/california-divide/2020/08/guest-worker-COVID-outbreak-california/>

⁶ https://santamariatimes.com/news/local/govt-and-politics/COVID-19-cases-among-ag-workers-hispanics-disproportionately-higher-in-santa-maria/article_d7ca4b08-e70c-5917-ba3e-5eca94cc81cf.html

⁷ National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) California Sample FY2015-2016

⁸ Indigenous Farmworker Study – January 2010

among Latinx, a group which only comprises 38.9 percent of the population. For COVID-19 deaths, 48.5 percent were among Latinx persons. In other words, Latinx persons are 56 percent more likely to contract COVID-19 than their representation in the population and 25 percent more likely to die from it.⁹ Unfortunately, data have not been collected to reflect the impacts of the indigenous migrant population.

Higher risk rural regions

The rural regions where farmworkers live and work have higher case rates than other counties. All major agricultural counties in the state are now in the “purple” tier of outbreaks, meaning that COVID-19 is widespread. Even before the recent changes in tier status of counties, all the counties in the San Joaquin Valley where half of California’s farmworkers reside, were in the “purple” category, as were the Imperial and Coachella Valleys and Monterey County – the salad bowl of America.¹⁰

California’s Equity Metric which relies on the California Healthy Places Index (HPI) shows that farmworker regions such as the San Joaquin Valley and Inland Empire have a disproportionate share of census tracts in the most disadvantaged quartile of HPI scores. In the San Joaquin Valley¹¹, 53 percent of census tracts were in the most disadvantaged quartile and in the Inland Valley (Riverside and San Bernardino Counties), 40 percent of census tracts are in the lowest quartile.¹²

Higher risk farmworker communities

Recent analyses are highlighting the increased risk of COVID-19 that farmworker communities face in relation to California as a whole, and even when compared to their own counties. In Fresno County (the largest agricultural county in California with nearly \$8 billion in agricultural production), farmworker towns have COVID-19 case rates that are 2.2 times higher than California as a whole and 1.4 times higher than Fresno County as a whole. Similarly, the Eastern Coachella Valley farmworker towns have COVID-19 rates are 2.4 higher than California, and twice as high as Riverside County.¹³

Crowded farmworker housing also appears to play a role in increased exposure to COVID-19. Joint housing is common in farmworker communities, where different households (or budgetary units) share housing. The crowded housing puts people with different social networks in intimate contact with each other since they share bathrooms, kitchens and other common areas. This contact may allow the virus to spread through the farmworker community at an accelerated pace. In the Salinas Valley, agricultural communities with overcrowded

⁹ California COVID-19 Race and Ethnicity Data – October 21, 2020

¹⁰ <https://COVID19.ca.gov/state-dashboard/>, accessed November 16, 2020

¹¹ Fresno, Kern, Kings, Madera, Merced, San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Tulare Counties

¹² California Healthy Places Index (HPI) is a composite measure of socioeconomic opportunity applied to census tracts that includes 25 individual indicators across economic, social, education, transportation, housing, environmental and neighborhood sectors. Healthy Places Index, healthyplacesindex.org

¹³ Analysis by Edward Kissam (publication in progress)

conditions (where 54 % of families share housing with non-family members), have COVID-19 rates that are 1.8 higher than Monterey County as a whole.¹⁴

Largely uninsured population

Farmworkers are largely uninsured and lack access to basic health services. Nearly seven out of ten farmworkers (68%) have no employer provided coverage and 43 percent lack any coverage according to the California sample of the National Agricultural Workers Survey - FY 15-16.

Most farmworkers also do not have access to full scope Medi-Cal coverage due to their immigration status (56% are unauthorized according to NAWs). And even if undocumented farmworkers were able to enroll in Medi-Cal, as a “working poor” population, most farmworkers would not be eligible for Medi-Cal since they are over the Medi-Cal income thresholds. The median personal income of farmworkers is \$17,500 to \$20,000 putting at least half of farmworkers above the Medi-Cal eligibility limit of \$17,609 for a single person. Many farmworkers may only be eligible in the off-season and put off enrollment until their income decreases.

Reluctant to access care – distrust

Farmworkers are fearful of the American health system and avoid using health services due to unfamiliarity and mistrust of the system and the potential of adverse immigration consequences. In the COVID-19 Farmworker Study¹⁵, nearly one-quarter (24%) of respondents said that they were fearful of accessing health services during the pandemic, citing fear of government or immigration consequences, distrust of the healthcare system and/or exposure to COVID-19. In addition, more than half of respondents (59%) reported additional barriers to accessing care for reasons due to cost, lack of insurance, and/or lack of sick leave.

Recommendations

1. The California Vaccination Plan needs to prioritize farmworkers by clearly placing them in Phase 1. They are essential workers with elevated risk of exposure at work and home, and reluctant to access to health services.
2. The Vaccination Plan should have a farmworker specific component developed by an expert sub-team composed of ag worker data experts, community outreach and communication experts and community based organizations. The challenges of enumerating farmworkers and understanding how to reach them in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways require an intense and informed process to ensure that vaccines are equitably available to farmworker communities. The plan should identify appropriate locations to reach farmworkers where they live, work and congregate.

14 Analysis by Richard K. Mines. (Paper in process). The joint housing rates were collected during the 2017 Farmworker Housing Study in Salinas. <https://www.cityofsalinas.org/our-city-services/community-development/regional-farmworker-housing-study>

15 <http://COVID19farmworkerstudy.org>

3. The Vaccination Plan should be respectful of cultural values and personal rights so farmworkers can make informed decisions about vaccines for their families, free of undue influence from government and employers.
4. Outreach and education through trusted messengers (e.g. community health promoters, community organizations, labor groups, faith communities, public health) should begin now, as vaccines are tested and vetted. To overcome the fears of cost, health consequences and accessing care, as well as the barriers of language, distance and time, a targeted educational campaign must start immediately. Particular focus on the 30 percent of farmworkers who are women and the nearly half (47%) who are married parents can broaden the acceptance of vaccines for the whole family.

Conclusion

The nation’s food system and the health of rural California are at stake during COVID-19. Given the heightened risk of COVID-19 that California farmworkers, their families and communities face, farmworkers should be given the highest priority in COVID-19 vaccine distribution. Overcoming systemic health access barriers and the reluctance of farmworkers to seek services requires specific planning and concerted outreach and education efforts to farmworker communities if California is to be successful in equitable vaccine distribution.

For further information, contact Noe Paramo, California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, nparamo@crlaf.org, (209) 499-8637, or Joel Diringer, Diringer and Associates, joel@diringerassociates.com, (805) 544-7722.

Prepared by the COVID-19 Farmworker and Rural Immigrant Community Advocacy Coalition
Partner organizations signing on to date:

- | | |
|--|---|
| Alianza Coachella Valley | Mixteco/Indigena Community Organizing Project (MICOP) |
| Dolores Huerta Foundation | TODEC |
| California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation | UFW Foundation |
| Central Valley Immigrant Integration Collaborative (CVIIC) | Vision y Compromiso |
| Health4Kern/Faith in the Valley | West Modesto Collaborative |
| Lideres Campesinas | |

Funding provided by
The California Endowment

Technical support provided by
Diringer and Associates

