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Steps in Meeting the Needs of Kentucky's Migrant Farmworkers

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SUMMARY. Hispanic migrant farmworkers have only recently become a part of Kentucky's farm labor force. Previously, small farms in the state relied on family members and neighbors to harvest crops, especially tobacco. However, as these numbers of local workers have diminished, more small farmers are hiring Hispanic farmworkers. From 1992 to 1995, there was a 40% increase in the number of Hispanic migrant farmworkers in Kentucky, bringing population estimates to between 6000 and 8000; increases are projected into the

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foreseeable future. This paper describes one of the first steps taken to address the health and social needs of migrant farmworkers in Kentucky. The Migrant Network Coalition is a group of individuals representing over 30 agencies in Central Kentucky that deal with migrant farmworkers. In an effort to inform the broader community about the special needs of migrant farmworkers, the Coalition hosted the first statewide conference on migrant issues in Kentucky. The conference attracted over 120 participants representing a variety of service agencies and agricultural sectors. The vast majority of attendees gave the conference high marks, and over 80% reported that they found the presentations to be both enjoyable and informative. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: getinfo@haworth.com]*

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INTRODUCTION

Hispanic migrant farmworkers have only recently become a part of Kentucky's farm labor force. Previously, farmers in the state relied on family members and neighbors to harvest crops, especially tobacco. As these numbers of local laborers have diminished, more Kentucky farmers are hiring Hispanic farmworkers.¹ From 1992 to 1995, there was a 40% increase in the number of Hispanic migrant farmworkers in Kentucky, bringing population estimates to between 6000 and 8000;² increases are projected into the foreseeable future.

Currently there are few services available in Kentucky to meet migrant farmworkers' health and social needs. Migrants throughout the United States have difficulty finding and using preventive health services,³ and in Kentucky, where no federally-funded migrant health clinics exist, access is further limited. Specific health problems prevalent in this population include respiratory, skin, dental and eye problems, hypertension, tuberculosis, alcohol abuse, diabetes, and sexually transmitted diseases.^{4,5} In Kentucky's tobacco-growing region, migrant farmworkers, like all tobacco workers, are at risk for injuries and illnesses related to tobacco harvest and housing, such as falls, lacerations, and acute nicotine poisoning. In a 1996 survey of migrant farmworkers in Central Kentucky, many respondents reported that they do not know where to go for treatment of illnesses or injuries. Many stated that when they experienced health problems, they usually either did nothing or resorted to over-the-counter or home remedies.⁴

Other problems migrant farmworkers face include lack of adequate housing, poor sanitation in the field and in living quarters, and lack of reliable transportation from living quarters to worksites.⁵ Unlike in many states where large numbers of workers are hired to work on large farm operations, the typical small family farmer in Kentucky generally hires only a few workers each season. Thus workers often live and work geographically scattered, making it difficult for them to interact with each other, and making outreach activities by service providers difficult. Cultural and language barriers, as well as lack of an infrastructure to provide health and social services to migrant farmworkers in this region, results in many unmet needs. These barriers can negatively affect migrant farmworkers' contacts with the broader community—at work, during leisure hours, or when interacting with the educational and legal systems.⁵

MIGRANT NETWORK COALITION

While individual agencies in Kentucky were slowly beginning to target services to the expanding migrant farmworker population,⁵ there were gaps in communication among agencies serving migrant farmworkers, as well as gaps in knowledge within agencies about the multitude of problems faced by this population. To bridge these gaps, in 1994 the Southeast Center for Agricultural Health and Injury Prevention formed the Migrant Network Coalition. This group is composed of over 50 individuals from 30 different agencies, including various disciplines at the University of Kentucky, state- and county-level health department and public school personnel, local government, representatives from local church ministries, private foundations, and local service organizations. The group meets monthly to share information about migrant farmworkers' needs and the services available to meet those needs.

CONFERENCE ON MIGRANT ISSUES

Through participation in the Coalition, members have achieved a heightened awareness concerning migrant farmworkers, and they have moved to increase that awareness among a wider audience in Kentucky. In March 1996, the group hosted the first statewide conference on migrant issues to be held in Kentucky, to: (1) share information about issues relevant to migrant farmworkers in Kentucky, and (2) provide an opportunity for networking across groups that might not otherwise communi-

cate with each other. The 120 participants included farmers, farmworkers, cooperative extension agents and other agricultural personnel, and representatives of public and private social, educational, and health service agencies.

The conference featured presentations by local experts on social, educational, health, housing, and labor issues. Through these presentations, small-group panel discussions, and displays, conference participants:

- learned about the multitude of problems confronting migrant farmworkers
- had a forum to discuss the cultural and language barriers migrant farmworkers face in Kentucky
- learned about the services available to help migrant farmworkers be productive members of local communities.

Participants were asked to complete a short evaluation questionnaire at the end of the day. Eighty-three percent stated that they learned immediately useful information, 95% stated that they would share this information with their organizations, and 97% said they would be interested in attending another conference on migrant issues hosted by the Coalition.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The conference on migrant issues achieved several important results:

- gained attention from the media
- recruited new members for the Coalition
- intensified the Coalition's cohesiveness and sense of purpose.

The increased media attention has manifested itself in several print and television stories focusing on migrant issues, including a special series in the Lexington newspaper. Subsequent stories that mention the Coalition have led local residents to call the Coalition co-directors to inquire about volunteering time as interpreters or English as a Second Language (ESL) instructors. Coalition members are developing a weekly Spanish-language radio show for state public radio which will incorporate information about services for migrant farmworkers in a talk-and-music format.

The conference led to the immediate recruitment of ten new members, including the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government's Vice-May-

or and a reporter from the local newspaper. Since the conference, the group has increased by an average of one new member per month, many of whom state they heard about the Coalition from someone who had attended the conference. In September 1996, a follow-up symposium, hosted by a local church, dealt with how a caring community should respond to the problems faced by migrant farmworkers in the region. One hundred people attended the symposium, which featured Coalition members as panelists. Fourteen symposium attendees joined the Coalition at its next meeting.

The Coalition's cohesiveness and sense of purpose has expanded as a result of the conference. Members were active in seeking outside funding for this conference and in garnering financial support from their agencies, which further unified the Coalition toward common goals. Since the conference, the group has established sub-committees to work on a variety of new projects. Future projects include: (1) hosting a second conference on migrant issues which will target more farmers and farmworkers as attendees to promote more positive community/migrant interactions; (2) establishing clearinghouses on regional ESL classes and local interpreters to address language barriers; (3) hosting a one-day migrant health fair in Central Kentucky in the summer of 1997 to reach migrant farmworkers who currently have little knowledge about or access to health services. The fair will feature displays by various Coalition agencies, as well as by other local organizations that serve migrant farm workers. Health screenings and health education materials in Spanish will be offered. Entertainment and food will be provided to encourage participation.

Overall, the conference helped the Coalition gain recognition for migrant issues in the wider community and increased a sense of purpose for Coalition members. These results will strengthen the group's ability to meet the needs of both migrant farmworkers and the communities in which migrants live and work.

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