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## Employers' Perspective on Childcare Services for Hired Farm Workers

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### ABSTRACT

The goal of this project was to protect children while parents work in agriculture by improving off-farm services for children of migrant and seasonal farm workers. Large agricultural enterprises have policies forbidding children in the worksite. At the same time, their employees, who are trying to generate income, seek as many work hours as possible but often lack viable options for childcare services. As employers strive to increase their labor pool, and workers seek off-farm childcare, there is mutual interest in improving access to childcare services in agricultural regions dependent on large numbers of full-time and seasonal workers. This report describes the employers' perspectives on childcare needs of hired farm workers' families and their barriers and motivators to facilitating off-farm childcare services. Using descriptive survey research methodology, data were collected from a convenience sample of 102 agribusiness owners and Human Resource directors attending an agricultural conference regarding labor laws or personnel management. Results revealed significant differences for those companies employing more than 25 workers compared to their counterparts. Primary motivators for offering childcare as an employment benefit were improved employee morale, enhanced company reputation, and a more stable workforce. A major barrier was that half of large-scale enterprises lack guidance on how to provide childcare options for their workers. Survey results are being used to facilitate collaboration among employers, farm workers, and childcare providers to offer a safe, nurturing environment for children while their parents work in agriculture.

### KEYWORDS

Agriculture; child care; employers; farm workers; socio-ecological model

### Introduction

For most large-scale agricultural operations, children younger than 18 years are not permitted in the worksite. When the mother and father of young children both want income-generating jobs, the task of finding childcare services can be daunting. Similar to working parents in urban and rural non-agricultural settings, the goal is to find high quality, affordable, and available childcare services. However, the unique challenges faced in agriculture are that working parents may be hired for seasonal work and/or for work hours that extend beyond the days and times that childcare programs are open. Thus, hired farm workers, especially those employed for seasonal jobs with marginal incomes, face extra challenges when there are limited childcare options.

At the same time that farm workers struggle to find childcare services, agribusiness owners are striving to have a full capacity labor pool—employees who have the attention and energy to work

productively in time-sensitive situations such as planting or harvesting. A shortage of seasonal and full-time workers in agriculture has a profound effect on the profitability and viability of an agricultural operation, and employers and their Human Resource (HR) directors search for incentives to recruit and retain valuable employees. Thus, available childcare services can be a “win-win” proposition for agricultural employers and their workers.

The socio-ecological model (SEM) depicts how multiple spheres of influence can penetrate down to the level of affecting an individual's behaviors.<sup>1</sup> When the SEM is modified to the agricultural setting, it is clear that employers have the potential to strongly influence the culture of safety for hired workers and their families.<sup>2</sup> In addition to establishing company safety protocols and requiring workers to comply with safety guidelines, employers can also promote and facilitate the general well-being of their workforce and their families

through holistic programs and financial support of community services. Agricultural employers who promote, facilitate, and encourage workers to utilize high quality off-farm childcare services help promote the well-being and livelihood of children. Additionally, working parents whose children are utilizing high quality childcare services have increased peace of mind and can work more productively.

## Background

Over the past several years, information regarding farm parents' and hired farm workers' perspectives on quality childcare has become available. A 2012 report on childcare needs of farm families described the on- and off-farm work demands of farming parents that compromise their ability to supervise children.<sup>3</sup> Features of currently used rural childcare services included reliance on relatives, access to preschool or Head Start programs, and a dependence on mixed options (i.e., formal programs and relatives in-home) because of the inconsistent work hours in agriculture and distance and time to formal settings. Desired characteristics of ideal off-farm childcare programs included: accessibility in terms of time and distance to nearest location; availability in terms of eligibility of child/children, opening slots, and hours of service; and affordability, especially for low-income families. Recommendations for addressing the shortage of rural childcare options were presented, including the engagement of agribusiness leaders to collaboratively address the critical need for childcare services with community leaders and local social service agencies.<sup>3</sup>

Migrant and seasonal farm worker families have challenges associated with language differences, limited financial resources, being migrant and moving in order to work, as well as barriers to education, transportation, healthcare services, housing, and childcare.<sup>4,5</sup> Farm workers, especially those involved in seasonal work, typically try to work as many hours as possible, but often are held back from work due to lack of childcare services. This is especially problematic when both the mother and father desire gainful employment. Moreover, according to the most recent National Agricultural Worker Survey (NAWS) report, there

are an increasing number of women employed in agriculture, potentially increasing the need for childcare services.<sup>6</sup>

A project in Washington State, funded by the Agricultural Safety and Health Council of America (ASHCA), provided preliminary data for our project.<sup>7</sup> To better understand the challenge of safeguarding children while parents work in agriculture, focus groups were conducted at the agricultural worksite in break rooms or workshops with 27 farm workers. Farm worker women revealed that children are occasionally brought to the worksite with or without the employers' knowledge, because they had no alternative other than to miss work.<sup>8</sup> Farm worker women described their interest in generating income, and many indicated they would prefer to work extended hours in agriculture (vs. caring for children) if they could be assured their young children were in a safe environment and, ideally, with educational and recreational experiences. Most large agricultural enterprises have policies forbidding children in the worksite. Employers understand the risks and potential liability associated with children in a hazardous worksite. Given farm labor shortages in some areas, employers want to pursue options that increase the labor pool and reduce parents' stress regarding availability of services for their children.<sup>9</sup> The same Washington state project that conducted focus groups with farm worker women also gathered information from 44 agricultural employers regarding their employee's needs for childcare.<sup>7</sup> Nearly half of respondents reported their employees frequently needed care options for children younger than 6 years, and most (84%) indicated children are never or rarely brought to the worksite. The majority responded positively about trying to increase access to childcare and youth services for their workers, noting they need compatible hours and increased funding support.

## Methods

For this descriptive cross-sectional survey research study, we pilot tested and refined a paper-based data collection tool that was distributed to a convenience sample of attendees at agricultural conferences attended by owners or representatives of

agricultural companies seeking information on labor regulations and/or personnel management. The research plan was reviewed and approved by the Marshfield Clinic Research Foundation's Institutional Research Board (IRB).

### **Instrument**

The data collection objectives were to increase our knowledge about employers' current practices regarding support of childcare services for hired farm workers' families; to gain insights into barriers and motivators for offering childcare service as an employee benefit; and to understand any relationships between the survey respondents' characteristics and variables of interest. The theoretical basis for questions was partially based upon the Behavioral Reasoning Theory,<sup>10</sup> which the principal investigator had applied in a previous study that benchmarked employers' hiring and safety practices for adolescent farm workers.<sup>11</sup> Variables and terminology were initially tested in a questionnaire given to 27 employers attending a February 2015 annual meeting of the National Council of Agricultural Employers (NCAE) when the topic of model childcare services for farm workers was first presented.<sup>12</sup> Interviews with farm worker parents and childcare providers served as another source for variables and terminology.<sup>13</sup>

A 50-item survey instrument was drafted, pilot tested and refined. Five-point Likert-type scales (never to often; not important to extremely important; and strongly disagree to strongly agree) were used to measure variation in practices. Discrete response options or continuous variables (yes/no or numbers) were used to depict respondents' personal characteristics and their agricultural business. The survey instrument was provided as a single sheet, two-sided paper form.

### **Data collection**

Two agricultural employer events served as sites for data collection. The study team did not attend these events, but arranged with the organizers in advance via telephone and written instructions to follow specific steps for distribution, collection, and final return of survey forms. Event organizers were told they would receive an executive

summary of findings that they could share with their respective constituents.

In December 2015, the National Council of Agricultural Employers (NCAE) convened a Labor Forum in Las Vegas, NV. This 2-day conference was an opportunity for labor-intensive agricultural business representatives to learn the legal and practical aspects of hiring migrant and seasonal workers. Among the 210 attendees were lawyers, company owners, contract labor organizers, and HR managers (or comparable title). At the beginning of the Labor Forum, the event leader read from the prepared script, making an announcement about this project and requested that "any persons responsible for company/employee benefits or company policies regarding children" pick up a blank survey form at the registration desk. It was stressed that "no personally identifiable information would be collected." Completed forms could be returned at the same location and survey respondents would be given a small gift (a chocolate candy "cow pie" bar) as a token of appreciation. At several points during the forum, this announcement was repeated.

The second site for data collection was the January 2016 Annual Conference of Agricultural Personnel Management Association in Monterey, CA. This 2-day meeting is typically attended by 175 California-based agricultural company HR directors, lawyers, marketing consultants, and risk managers. The same survey instrument and solicitation process for securing completed survey forms were used. Registration desk personnel facilitated distribution of surveys and provided the gratuity candy bar upon return of the form.

At both data collection sites, completed forms were placed into a large envelope out of sight of event attendees. At the closing of the event, the envelope was sealed and immediately placed in a prestamped, express-return envelope to the study team. No problems were associated with the process. Extra blank forms were destroyed, and leftover candy was given to the event staff in gratitude for their assistance.

### **Data entry/analyses**

Data from written survey forms were coded and entered by trained staff using a systematic process to consistently resolve aberrant responses, missing

data, or illegible writing. Classification of jobs written as “other” was determined through consensus, as were decisions about clustering categories of responses for interpretation of findings. Data quality systems were implemented to ensure that data were collected, entered, and analyzed accurately. For this component of the project, quantitative data were analyzed via SAS (Cary, NC, USA). Descriptive statistics were obtained and reported. Categorical data were analyzed using Chi-square or Fisher’s exact test, and *P*-values were derived from the abovementioned statistical tests. A *P*-value of <0.05 was used to claim that there exists a statistically significant difference.

Initially, data from 71 participants (34% of attendees) at the Las Vegas event were reviewed, followed by data from the 31 participants (18% of attendees) of the Monterey event. Data were then analyzed to detect significant differences between the two groups’ demographics and study variables. Next, all data were merged and reviewed to assess collective responses, looking for any major outliers. Following this, merged data were analyzed to account for statistically significant differences based upon gender, respondent role (e.g., Owner, HR director), number of children/grandchildren, and number of employees. Basic descriptive statistics were obtained and reported, and *P*-values were derived from Chi-square or Fisher’s Exact test for categorical data and Wilcoxon Rank Sum test for continuous variables.

## Results

A total of 102 (71 + 31) usable surveys comprised the study sample from participants attending either of the two agricultural conferences. Of these, 59% were male. The average length of time working in agribusiness was 19.4 years, with an average of 15 years in his/her current company. Age of respondent was not asked, but a proxy was the number of children (mean = 2.5 children) and the number of grandchildren (mean = 2). The primary crops/products of respondents were grains, livestock, berries/grapes, and tree fruit. A question to address the company size in terms of workforce was “During peak production season, about how many employees do you typically

have?”, and response options were ≤25, 26–50, 51–100, 101–200, and 201 or more. Nearly half (48%) reported employing 201 or more workers, while 26.5% had 25 or fewer workers, and 25.4% had from 26 to 200 workers during peak season.

Respondents were asked about the type of child-care arrangement their employees currently use for children 0–6 years; to the best of their knowledge, they reported about 72% “sometimes” or “often” used a formal childcare center. About 80% responded that adult family members provided childcare, 89% reported a brother/sister in the home provided care, and 41% reported employees occasionally accessed a day camp or local park program. Only 9.4% had a company-owned child-care program for employees.

Table 1 depicts the sample demographics based upon the conference at which the survey was administered. The Las Vegas conference, for which the primary topic was federal labor laws with a focus on immigrant workers, had a majority of male respondents who were company owners/employers. Respondents from the Monterey, California conference, which addressed a variety of hiring and personnel management issues, were 83% female, and only 7% were owners/employers. Most of these participants reported being HR directors, risk managers, or filled in job titles such as Executive Assistant.

When combined data from both events were analyzed to contrast responses based on demographic variables (gender, role, number of chil-

**Table 1.** Subjects by location.

	Las Vegas	Monterey	<i>P</i> -value
Total	71	31	
Gender [# (%)] <sup>a</sup>			
Male	36 (51.4)	5 (16.7)	.0015
Female	34 (48.6)	25 (83.3)	
Role [# (%)]			<.0001
Employer	34 (50.8)	2 (6.9)	
HR director	15 (22.4)	13 (44.8)	
Other	18 (26.9)	14 (48.3)	
Produce [# (%) Yes] <sup>b</sup>			
Grains	45 (63.4)	30 (96.8)	.0002
Tree fruits/nuts	64 (90.1)	25 (80.7)	.2070
Berries/grapes	58 (81.7)	14 (45.2)	.0003
Beef/dairy/swine	49 (69.0)	30 (96.8)	.0016
Nursery/greenhouse	65 (91.6)	28 (90.3)	1.000

HR, Human Resource.

<sup>a</sup>Nonresponses were eliminated from the number/percentage calculation.

<sup>b</sup>More than one response permitted.

dren/grandchildren, company size), only a few statistically significant differences were detected. The greatest contrast was detected based upon company size, that is, the number of hired workers employed. The project team agreed to focus additional analyses on responses associated with those having >25 hired workers, since the project's overall goal was to facilitate off-farm childcare services in agricultural regions with the high populations of hired farm workers. Thus, further analyses were based upon company size, as measured by small agricultural company ( $\leq 25$  employees) versus a large agricultural company (>25 employees).

There were 6 of the 102 survey respondents who did not answer the question regarding number of employees; thus, the number of usable surveys for analyses based on company size was 26 individuals with  $\leq 25$  employees and 70 individuals with >25 employees. Table 2 reflects their demographic characteristics. Respondents from large companies were slightly more likely to be female, far more likely to be an HR director or nonowner, and tended to have fewer years working in agriculture, fewer years at his/her current company, and fewer children and grandchildren. This suggested that participants from large companies may be younger in age than those from smaller companies.

Respondents were asked about employees' childcare needs and his/her company practices regarding childcare as an employee benefit. For large companies, 92% believed employees need care for children age 0–6 years, and 90% reported their employees need before/after school care for 7–14-year-olds (Table 3).

**Table 2.** Subjects by number of employees.

	$\leq 25$ Employees	>25 Employees	<i>P</i> -value
Total			
Gender [# (%) <sup>a</sup> ]			
Male	14 (53.9)	26 (37.1)	.1661
Female	12 (46.1)	44 (62.9)	
Role [# (%)]			<.0001
Employer	19 (79.2)	18 (26.5)	
HR director <sup>b</sup>	3 (12.5)	36 (52.9)	
Other	2 (8.3)	14 (20.6)	
Years working (median)	25	15	.0757
Years w/this company (med.)	20	8	.0036
Median # children	3	2	.0377
Median # grandchildren	0	0	.0308

HR, Human Resource

<sup>a</sup>Nonresponses were eliminated from the number/percentage calculation.

<sup>b</sup>Includes HR managers or comparable title.

**Table 3.** Childcare needs by company size.

	$\leq 25$ Employees	>25 Employees	<i>P</i> -value
	[# (%) responding sometimes/often]		
Employees need care for 0–6-year-olds	11 (50)	60 (92.3)	<.0001
Employees need before/after school care for 7–14-year-olds	8 (36.4)	54 (90.0)	<.0001
Despite rules, employees bring 0–14-year-olds to worksite	9 (47.3)	12 (18.5)	.0087
Company assists locating services	4 (22.3)	20 (32.8)	.6407
Company gives financial support	4 (22.3)	10 (15.4)	.3409

Both these concerns were statistically different than smaller companies ( $p \leq .0001$ ). With smaller companies, about 47% of employees sometimes bring children into the worksite, despite company rules forbidding their presence; contrasted to only 18.5% occurrence on large enterprises ( $p = .0087$ ). There was no statistically significant difference between small or large companies regarding their current practice to assist employees with locating services (22% vs. 33%) or providing financial support for childcare services (22% vs. 15%).

Of keen interest to the project team were barriers and motivators to providing childcare services as an employee benefit. Table 4 data reveal that about half of respondents from large companies indicated they need guidance on how to facilitate and implement childcare services for employees, and they are in a position of authority to implement such services. When asked about company priorities, only 5.7% of large companies indicated that this was a low priority, in contrast to small companies, where 27.3% viewed this as a low priority ( $p = .0059$ ). Customers of small companies (26%) were less likely to care about employee benefits than large companies, where it was reported by only 11.8% respondents that customers do not care about workers' benefits.

**Table 4.** Barriers to providing childcare by company size.

	$\leq 25$ Employees	>25 Employees	<i>P</i> -value
	[# (%) responding agree/strongly agree]		
Is NOT a high priority	6 (27.3)	4 (5.7)	.0059
Have position of authority to implement	7 (30.5)	38 (55.0)	.5635
Company needs guidance	7 (30.5)	35 (50)	.0011
Customers do not care about employees' benefits	6 (26.0)	8 (11.8)	.1399

Based on preliminary studies, motivators to providing childcare services were categorized into eight factors with response options on a 5-point scale of not important, slightly important, important, very important, and extremely important. Of these, there was a statistically significant difference between small and large companies for seven of the eight factors (Table 5). For depicting the details in Table 5, responses of important, very, and extremely important were clustered. The primary motivators for large companies to facilitate and/or provide childcare services were a “more stable workforce” (90%) and “improved employee morale” (90%). This was followed by “enhanced company reputation” (88%). Large companies recognize that childcare services would allow employees to work more hours (78%) and facilitate employment of more women (73%). Childcare services could be used as a recruiting tool (70%), and large companies (77%) indicated that this

would reduce their concern about childhood injuries. Large companies were slightly more likely (66%) to view “decreased jeopardy regarding child labor issues” (e.g., lower risk of penalties for violating laws) as a motivator than small companies (41%).

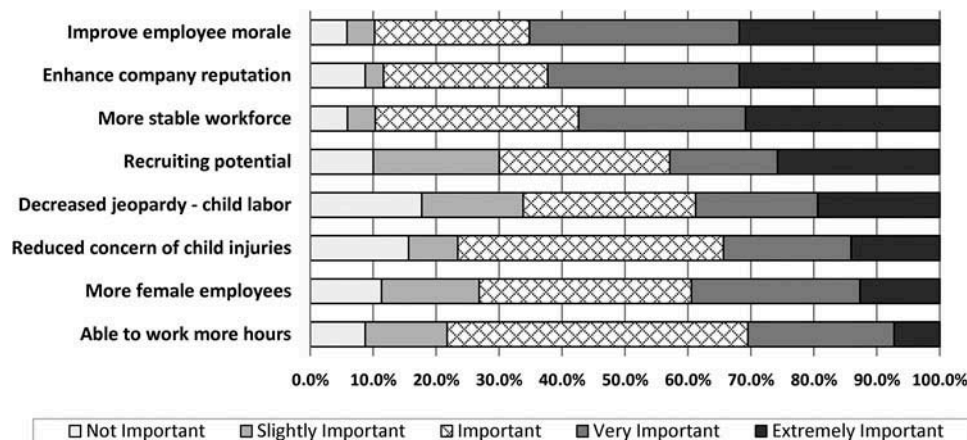
Factors that would motivate large agricultural companies to offer childcare services as an employee benefit are further delineated in Figure 1. Specific responses on a 5-point scale (not important, slightly important, important, very important, and extremely important) are depicted by percentage of total responses. When considering what is an “extremely important” motivator, the factors of improved employee morale and enhanced company reputation are rated the most highly.

### Discussion

The success of an agricultural business, especially a large operation with labor-intensive production activities, such as harvesting ripe fruits and vegetables, is absolutely dependent on a stable and capable workforce. Pursuing opportunities to secure a stable work force is an important motivator for employers particularly in light of increasing challenges associated with U.S. immigration policy and the political climate surrounding immigration reform. Thus, it is not surprising that agricultural employers view childcare benefits for employees as a potential strategy for recruitment and retention of workers.

**Table 5.** Motivators to providing childcare by company size.

	≤25 Employees	>25 Employees	P-value
[5 pt. scale; # (%) responding extremely, very, important]			
Improve employee morale	12 (52.1)	62 (89.8)	.0006
Enhance company reputation	9 (39.1)	61 (88.4)	.0001
More stable workforce	11 (47.0)	61 (89.8)	.0002
Recruiting potential	7 (30.5)	49 (69.9)	<.0001
More female employees	6 (26.1)	52 (73.3)	<.0001
Able to work more hours	9 (42.9)	54 (78.3)	.0038
Reduced concern of child injuries	10 (45.5)	49 (76.6)	.0187
Decreased jeopardy—child labor	9 (40.9)	41 (66.2)	.0756



**Figure 1.** Large-scale employers' motivating factors for childcare services.

The current labor shortage in agriculture puts farm workers in a position of choosing an employer based on working conditions, salary, and benefits. This is especially the case for working parents who aim to “settle in” to a location for extended periods. Agricultural workers, especially those doing seasonal activities, are often interested in generating as much income as possible, but they may be hampered in accepting employment due to parenting responsibilities, which take precedence over work. Lack of childcare options increases the likelihood of employees missing work altogether, being tardy, or being distracted while at work. This translates back to three of the employers’ top five motivating factors for facilitating childcare—“more stable workforce,” “more female workers,” and “able to work more hours.”

Agricultural companies are sometimes viewed in a negative light by worker advocates and/or small-scale companies. Their priorities may be considered profits and competitive edge over their smaller counterparts. It was surprising to learn that the most highly rated motivating factor by the large company respondents was “improved employee morale,” which is more often associated with smaller operations, especially those with family members engaged in leadership.

An interesting finding was that large-scale employers were more likely than small-scale employers to list “reduced concern of child injuries.” This concern would seem more aligned with smaller enterprises that were more likely to report children coming into the worksite. It is possible that the preponderance of HR directors representing large-scale farms was very attuned to risk management and liability, or that because of their younger age, they were more concerned about the safety of children.

Data from this study describe a strong interest and willingness of large-scale agricultural employers to facilitate off-farm childcare options for their employees, with more than half expressing interest. Given that they appreciate the value of childcare services, this clearly indicates the need for someone or some organization to address this need.

Circling back to the SEM for influencing individual behaviors, this study revealed that large-scale agricultural employers are willing to adopt company practices with employee benefits that could trickle down to the level of protecting

children from adverse exposures associated with agricultural environments. This relatively high level of influence could be extended even further if federal and/or state policies (highest sphere of SEM) provided financial support and guidance for off-farm childcare services.

### **Limitations**

This study was limited in scope as a component of a larger initiative to facilitate off-farm childcare services for children of migrant and seasonal farm workers. A convenience sample was used of respondents interested in the topic; thus, results may be skewed to a best situation, and findings. The study participants, representing agricultural businesses (large farms, ranches, and vineyards), were drawn from events away from their worksite, which were not associated with the topic of this study. Data were derived from self-reports of respondents who were not in a position to confirm accuracy of certain responses (e.g., type of childcare currently used) with their employees. Further, the completion of survey forms was conducted in various locations within the conference area, likely with distractions, leading to incomplete forms and hurried responses. The primary goal was to understand pertinent perspectives of employers, and only 70 usable surveys were available to depict barriers and motivators to childcare services of large agricultural companies. Furthermore, no statistical power analyses were preplanned.

This study is the first known report on this topic. Although small in scale, the findings shed preliminary light on an important issue. For purposes of our overall project, only 50% of respondents indicated they were in a position of authority to implement programs, but by participating in this study, they became aware of business advantages that could be transmitted to company leaders. An option “for more information” on this topic was provided as a sign up sheet at the conference registration table so project staff could follow-up with guidance if so requested.

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