

Si Se Puede*

Developing Farmworker Housing in the 12th District

By Vivian Pacheco

The community of Mecca, California, gained attention in the 1980s as a site for Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers' efforts to mobilize for farmworker rights and bring an end to farmworkers' exposure to crop pesticides. In a recent documentary, *Mecca: Legacy to Cesar Chavez*, the town's unity—formed through its history of struggle for farmworker rights—is set against a backdrop of its current challenges, including globalization, industrial restructuring, and urban encroachment on farmland.

Perhaps one of the leading challenges, however, is providing farmworker housing. The population of Mecca—just over 5,000 people most of the year—triples every June, as migrant¹ farmworkers come to town to help harvest the nation's supply of table grapes. The community has figured out how to creatively accommodate the population influx by increasing the number of laundromats and pay phones, and renting empty lots where migrants can pitch their tents. Other Mecca residents clear out their garages and backrooms to rent to the working visitors. These housing solutions may be workable for unaccompanied seasonal farmworkers, but where do those who find year-round work live? What about those workers with children? Despite common perceptions, many farmworker households do include children, and finding safe and affordable housing is vital to their well-being. In this article, we examine some of the issues around providing farmworker housing in the Federal Reserve's 12th District, from the barriers to financing temporary housing to the solutions being implemented in places such as California's Coachella Valley and Washington State.

Farmworker housing is a critical issue within the Federal Reserve's 12th District, particularly when examined in light of the importance of the agricultural economy in states like California, Oregon, and Washington and the role that farmworkers play in contributing to population and economic growth in rural communities. California, for instance, is the world's fifth largest supplier of food and agricultural commodities.² To harvest these crops, California employs an estimated 732,000 farmworkers, many of them migrants.³ The farmworker populations in other agricultural regions of the 12th District are large as well,⁴ and increasingly, migrant

farmworkers are finding year-round work in rural communities from Eastern Washington to San Diego County. In fact, more than half of all farmworkers live in the same community all year long—a statistic that stands in stark contrast to the image of the itinerant farmworker.⁵ While exact figures of the farmworker housing need are difficult to track, a significant number of farmworkers and their families live in overcrowded, overpriced, substandard dwellings, or make do in cars, tents, or under trees.⁶

The costs of inadequate farmworker housing are high. Public health issues are a primary concern—crowded and unsanitary housing can, for instance, contribute to the incidence of highly infectious conditions such as tuberculosis and influenza.⁷ Children of workers may be especially at risk of contracting such illnesses. Children housed in older, substandard housing may also be at risk of exposure to lead, or to mold and pests that can contribute to the incidence of asthma.⁸ In addition to health impacts, research has shown that children's learning ability, attention span, and overall confidence are strongly correlated with housing quality and stability.⁹

Farmworkers and their families are not the only ones who bear the costs of inadequate housing, however. Agricultural businesses also can be affected, particularly when the lack of housing makes it harder to find workers during critical harvesting seasons. Historically, farm owners provided their employees with shelter during the harvest, but deteriorating housing structures and code enforcement made them

Farmworkers at a Glance¹⁸

Box 2.1

- The majority of crop workers are men who are on average 33 years old.
- Most were born outside of the U.S., about 75 percent of whom were born in Mexico.
- In 2005-2006, the average farmworker earned approximately \$9 an hour¹⁹ and the average work week consisted of 42 hours. The average farmworker is employed by crop work 34.5 weeks a year. This totals to approximately \$13,120 in annual earnings.
- Approximately 80 percent of workers lack health insurance.

* Spanish for "It Can Be Done"—A phrase coined by Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers Union

too expensive to maintain. As a result, employer-provided housing has sharply declined in recent decades.¹⁰ However, growers are realizing that providing affordable housing can help them attract workers and allow them to develop a stable workforce that returns annually.¹¹ As described below, farm owners and agricultural businesses have become key partners in innovative strategies to provide housing for farmworkers.

Barriers to Providing Farmworker Housing

Providing affordable housing, as well as other infrastructure and services, is critical to ensuring stable economic and community development in rural places, but a number of factors create significant barriers to developing housing accessible to farmworkers. Issues revolving around immigration status and the gap between earnings and housing costs are compounded by a lack of both funding and land for development.

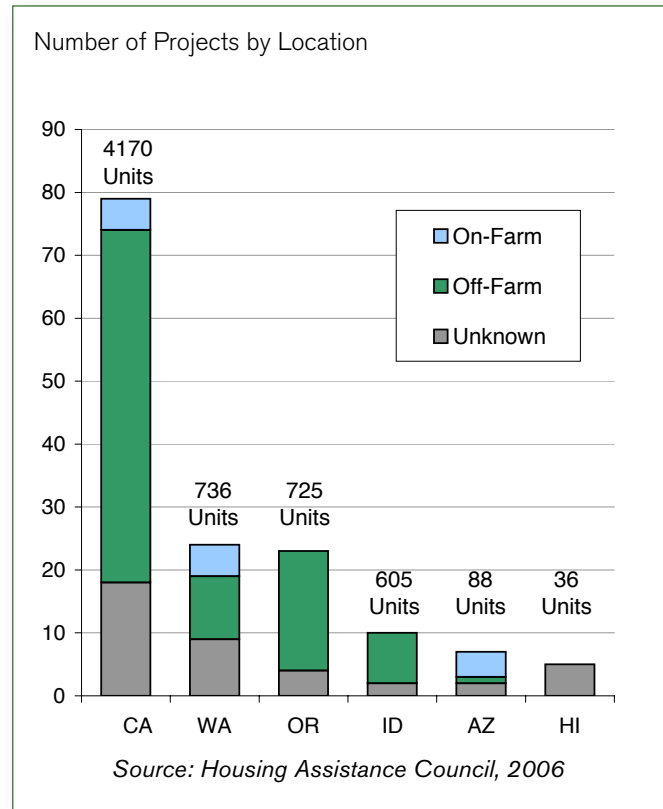
One key barrier to providing affordable and adequate housing for farmworkers is immigration status. Approximately three-quarters of farmworkers are foreign-born, and as many as half of these farmworkers are unauthorized to work in the United States.¹² The lack of legal immigration status can affect housing opportunities in a number of ways. For example, the majority of farmworker housing developments are funded by the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Rural Development Agency. Federally funded housing requires lease signers to be legal residents, shutting out many farmworkers in need. Housing providers have also found that unauthorized farmworkers may fear that accepting subsidized housing will bring them to the attention of immigration authorities. In addition, continued debate and tension about how the U.S. should treat undocumented immigrants can affect public support for farmworker housing programs.

A second barrier, and perhaps the most significant, is the gap between farmworker wages and housing prices, particularly in high-cost real estate markets like California and Washington. Approximately 30 percent of all farmworkers fall below the national poverty line.¹³ Housing is only affordable when families or workers "double up."¹⁴ For some farmworkers, earning a low wage means deciding between housing and sending a significant portion of their earnings home to support their family.

Exacerbating the problem is a lack of funding for farmworker housing projects. Since the 1960s, \$1 billion in federal funds have contributed to close to 800 active farmworker housing projects across the country. This investment has resulted in 144 existing Section 514/516¹⁵ funded projects and nearly 6,300 units in the 12th District (see Figure 2.1). However, currently, most of the funding is spent on the maintenance of projects built 15 years ago, not on the development of new projects, despite advocates' efforts and requests for funding of new developments. As the number of farmworkers has increased, the gap between the supply and demand for housing has grown. In addition, construction costs have

USDA Section 514/516 Farm Labor Housing in the 12th District

Figure 2.1



risen relative to the amount of funding available, which further limits the number of units that can be financed under existing subsidy programs.

Developers also face significant challenges in securing land for farmworker housing projects. According to Nadia Villagran, Director of Community Services for the Coachella Valley Housing Coalition, the lack of funding and the lack of land are linked. "As a nonprofit, we compete with for-profit developers for land," she said. "And in many of these areas, the price of land is unaffordable for 'affordable' housing." Zoning laws that restrict housing development can also contribute to the shortage of land. NIMBYist or "Not In My Back Yard" attitudes against farmworkers, low-wage workers, and immigrants can also derail projects and add to the costs of planning and construction.

Developing Solutions to Farmworker Housing Needs

Despite these barriers and challenges, farmworker housing groups are working on ways to improve housing conditions for farmworkers and their families. These solutions, though not always free from controversy, are responding to local needs and building on local assets, and range from providing temporary shelter to developing permanent housing as well as community facilities and infrastructure.

At one end of the spectrum, government agencies and farm owners have been developing innovative solutions to provide short-term housing for migrant farmworkers. Washington State provides one example of this type of strategy. The cherry harvest during the months of June and July demands an unusually large labor force to quickly pick the fruit from the branches. Noting the negative impacts of homeless migrant workers, in 1995 the state government approved a program that licensed growers to provide camp sites with sanitary facilities to their workers, who could bring their own tents for the season.¹⁶ This successful program has expanded into a Rent-a-Tent program that allows workers to rent a six-person tent, and provides access to a refrigerator, showers, and toilets. This program has been a cost-efficient way to provide housing for the quick two-week harvest, and mitigates the health costs associated with unsanitary housing conditions.

For longer growing seasons, more permanent structures are needed, but financing these units is a challenge. Since farmworker wages are low and often unstable, covering the costs of operations and debt service through rent receipts is difficult. As such, seasonal housing must generally be free of debt, despite the fact that grants and subsidies for this type of housing are scarce. The Coachella Valley Housing Coalition (CVHC) is one of a handful of affordable housing providers that has developed seasonal housing in the 12th District. Recently, CVHC developed Las Mañanitas, a 128-unit migrant housing project, in Mecca—the only development in the region targeted specifically to migrant workers. To make this possible, project development and construction costs were funded through debt-service free sources, such as the California’s Joe Serna, Jr. Farmworker Housing Grant and Farmworker Housing Tax Credits. Throughout the process, CVHC partnered with Riverside County, which allocated Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) funds to subsidize the operating costs of the seasonal housing units. To maximize resources, Las Mañanitas is located in proximity to CVHC’s other affordable farmworker housing complexes, allowing the project and maintenance managers to split their time between the developments. The proximity also allows



Las Mañanitas Apartments in Mecca, California, a 128-bed migrant farmworker housing complex, was developed by Coachella Valley Housing Coalition. Operations are subsidized through CDBG funds.

the complexes to share the community room that houses a computer lab, a visiting clinic that offer wellness health checks and prenatal care, ESL classes, and child care and pre-K education provided by the Migrant Head Start program. Although in winter months the occupancy level drops to 30 percent, CDBG funds allow the project to continue operations throughout the year.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are organizations enlisting broader approaches to housing and community development for farmworker communities that incorporate opportunities for homeownership and asset-building. In the Central Valley, Self-Help Enterprises (SHE) has used a mutual-help model of producing single family homes that has opened the opportunity for affordable homeownership to farmworker families. The program allows a family to exchange their labor for a down-payment, which requires families to work together and contribute at least 1,300 hours

Overcrowding in Farmworker Housing, Including Crowded Units with Children

Box 2.2

(Excluding Dormitory/Barracks, Campsite/Tent and No Shelter Classifications)

| State | Percent Crowded | Percent of Crowded Units with Children |
|------------|-----------------|--|
| California | 43.1 | 89.5 |
| Idaho | 27.3 | 100.0 |
| Oregon | 40.5 | 85.4 |
| Washington | 57.9 | 98.7 |

These numbers are based on a survey conducted in 1997 with a sample of 2,840. This survey used the U.S. Census Bureau and American Housing Survey’s definition of crowding: units with a mean of more than one person per room, excluding bathrooms. In comparison, the American Housing Survey (AHS) found that only 2 percent of all U.S. households and 3 percent of all nonmetropolitan households are crowded.

Source: Housing Assistance Council, 2001



The Housing Authority of Chelan County and the City of Wenatchee operate housing units for both seasonal and permanent farmworkers in East Wenatchee, Washington.

of labor building homes, in addition to their work and personal schedules, to mutually assist in the construction of each home.¹⁷


Over the past 42 years, SHE has used the self-help model to construct 5,000 new homes, which in turn has helped to create a connected community of neighbors who continue to care and provide for each other. SHE further supports community development by providing technical assistance and labor for infrastructure development, most commonly building safe drinking water sources and sewer systems. Peter Carey, executive director of SHE, notes that “investment in housing at all economic levels is investment in community. We see that the children are more confident and happier, and have the energy and attention to do their schoolwork. Over the long-term, the up-front investment will pay for itself many times over. Unfortunately, the USDA Section 502 program, the major source of funding for the mutual-help housing, is not included in the 2008 proposed federal budget.”

In Washington, U.S. Senator Patty Murray spearheaded an effort to develop a long-term comprehensive approach to farmworker housing by establishing the Washington State

Farmworker Housing Trust (the Trust). The Trust has adopted a multi-faceted strategy in their efforts to comprehensively meet both seasonal-occupancy and permanent farmworker housing needs, and is unique in that its board is comprised of equal representation from growers, labor advocates, local developers, and community members. “Farmworker housing has been a highly contentious issue for decades,” said Brien Thane, executive director of the Trust. “But the Trust has forged a strong coalition with a common mission. Having labor, employers and affordable housing interests at the same table working together has changed the tenor of the discussion, allowing us to move forward on increasing the development of farmworker housing in new ways.” The Trust has completed a state-wide survey of farmworkers to measure housing and community issues to ensure their projects are aligned with farmworkers’ interests—the survey results are projected to be released this summer.

The Trust is also working to build a Community Capacity Fund which will raise \$4 million in 4 years to help increase the rate of production of farmworker housing and improve sustainability and asset management. The Trust’s partners have undertaken a number of pilot projects experimenting with innovative strategies such as mixing permanent and seasonal-occupancy housing, cooperative leasing arrangements among growers, green building, and solar power generation. In their future plans, the Trust hopes to more systematically collect data on the community benefits of decent, affordable farmworker housing, such as improved health, education and employment. Such information will help address neighborhood concerns and strengthen local support.

Conclusion

As Thane noted, the farmworker housing discussion is changing in many areas of the 12th District, reflecting a greater appreciation for the need to address the shortage of housing in agricultural rural areas. This change in the discussion has enabled new programs to emerge. Partnerships between local and state governments, employers, developers, social service providers, and community organizations are leading to comprehensive projects that can help integrate farmworkers and their families into their communities. The wide range of services offered contributes to safe, healthy and stable housing, and opens up new opportunities to children of farmworkers. Ultimately, these partnerships and solutions can have a positive economic and social impact on rural communities throughout the 12th District. 

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