

de la Guerra, Sheila **Public Comment**



From: Hazel Davalos <hazel@causenow.org>
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To: sbcob
Subject: BOS Public Comment for 7/7

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Hello my name is Hazel Davalos, organizing director with CAUSE, based out of Santa Maria. I've been alarmed by the growing rate of cases here and it's concerning that over 25% of cases in the city are agricultural workers. My organization in partnership with MICOP sent you a joint statement last week because we fear things could get much worse, especially for farmworkers if the county doesn't act quickly. Specifically we'd like to see the county supervisors, public health department and agricultural commission take steps to increase regulation of the agricultural industry. Ag is the largest employer of essential workers in our county, if we're going to get serious about stopping workplace transmission of the virus this is the first place that you should look.

Last week there was a major outbreak in Ventura County where 176 out of 200 h-2a farmworkers housed at a Reiter owned facility tested positive for COVID-19. This shouldn't come as a surprise, when you have that many people living in dormitory style housing, the risk of spread is great. I come today to ask that you all heed this warning, two of the companies housing workers at that facility, Elkhorn and Royal Oaks both have operations in Santa Maria, and Santa Maria is one of the number one destinations for h-2a workers in the state, we are literally a ticking time bomb.

Please review the proposals outlined in our statement which include requesting the board of supervisors to direct ag commission to require agricultural employers to notify workers in Spanish and Indigenous languages about the sick leave they're entitled to if infected, arrange for more frequent testing and screening of workers, and put an end to retaliation against workers who speak up about the need for more safety protocols.

We'd like you to direct public health to increase inspection and enforcement within the agricultural industry, in particular we'd like to see the implementation of a bathroom and water inspection program as well as the department setting higher requirements for h-2a housing that ensure safety for these guestworkers.

Finally we'd also like to see you all as a Board, revise your Agricultural Employee Dwellings policy to state that if a grower wants to house h-2a workers in county unincorporated land, they must provide a COVID safety protocol plan, have a public health officer walk through their facility prior to housing workers there and require that employers test h-2a workers upon their arrival to the country.

Taking these steps right away is crucial. We have approximately 2,000 h-2a workers in the City of Santa Maria alone. Many companies bring in a new group of h-2a workers for the fall harvest. We need you to act now.



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