

Testimony of Will Lambek

Senate Agriculture Committee April 23, 2020

- California gubernatorial announcement: <https://www.gov.ca.gov/2020/04/15/governor-newsom-announces-new-initiatives-to-support-california-workers-impacted-by-covid-19/>
- New Jersey law (passed unanimously 3/19/20): <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1BIVhwOL2OFaWcxWNk0AXgxfjH5LUBt1j/view>
- And to augment the farm health information presented this morning, here is the executive summary of a more recent and comprehensive study demonstrating the high rates of injury and illness faced by Vermont farmworkers, as well as the lack of training and safety precautions: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1w4SMOlbE-vUQKk9S9EGdKQqFa8fGJrQE/view?usp=sharing>

### **Migrant Justice Testimony and Proposal**

Many immigrants in Vermont are being deemed “essential workers” but are being excluded from federal and state responses to the crisis. An effective response to a public health emergency necessarily means including everyone. We see a dire and urgent need for the state to take swift action to allocate resources – including money allocated to the state from the CARES Act – to protect immigrant workers.

Immigrants in Vermont – particularly the immigrant community that is sustaining the dairy industry – face particular risks and hardships at this time.

- Farmworkers must continue working every day to put food on our tables, placing themselves at continued risk of infection
- Lack of PPE on dairy farms was already a serious problem and supplies have become scarcer still
- Cramped worker housing makes socially distancing impossible, increasing risk of community spread
- Paid sick leave under FFCRA should apply to farmworkers, but leave will not fully cover lost wages and there are serious concerns about its practical implementation on farms

To confront these challenges and ensure that state responses to support Vermonters during this time of crisis include immigrants, we are focused on three areas:

**Housing:** Ensure that the self-isolation and quarantine housing options provided by the Agency of Human Services are available and accessible to immigrant workers and families.

**Healthcare:** Expand Emergency Medicaid coverage to include COVID and related treatments, and relax financial eligibility requirements, following the lead of states like [MA](#), [NY](#), and [OR](#). (We are currently working with the Health Care / Health and Welfare Committees on a proposal)

**Economic Relief: Create a Vermont Coronavirus Relief Fund to administer direct payments to immigrant workers who have been excluded from the federal stimulus.**

Immigrant workers pay state, local, and federal taxes; however, unless they have a social security number, they will not qualify for federal stimulus checks or Unemployment Insurance. Vermont can correct for that exclusion, and support essential workers and the state economy, by creating a fund similar to those created by [California](#), [New Jersey](#), [Austin, TX](#), and other jurisdictions. We anticipate that this fund would primarily benefit the estimated 2-3,000 undocumented workers in Vermont, the majority of whom are part of the dairy farmworker community. It can be paid for by allocations from the \$1.25 billion Vermont has received through the CARES Act.

The fund should not have needs testing and should not be encumbered by burdensome documentation. It should be designed to replicate the federal "Economic Impact Payments" authorized by the CARES Act. We are open to working with the state to develop a disbursement process that is straightforward and confidential. This could be accomplished either through creating an application administered by a state agency – similar to what New Jersey has done – or by disbursing the direct payments through selected non-profit agencies, as California and other jurisdictions are doing.

Immigrant workers are being deemed essential during this time of crisis, sustaining the state's dairy industry during a pandemic. Vermont must take action to ensure that these workers are not left behind.

Will Lambek

Migrant Justice // Justicia Migrante

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