

# **Advancing the Farm Labor Housing Initiative**

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- Lise Anderson, [Addison Allies](#)
- John Ryan, VT Agricultural Development Program

## **Table of Contents**

Introduction	2
The Problem with Housing	3
ZEM Homes	5
Stories from the Source	7
Methods	7
Farmworkers' Stories	8
Farmers' Stories	8
Other Stories	8
What Does This Mean for Housing?	10
Additional Resources	11
Bibliography	13

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## **Introduction**

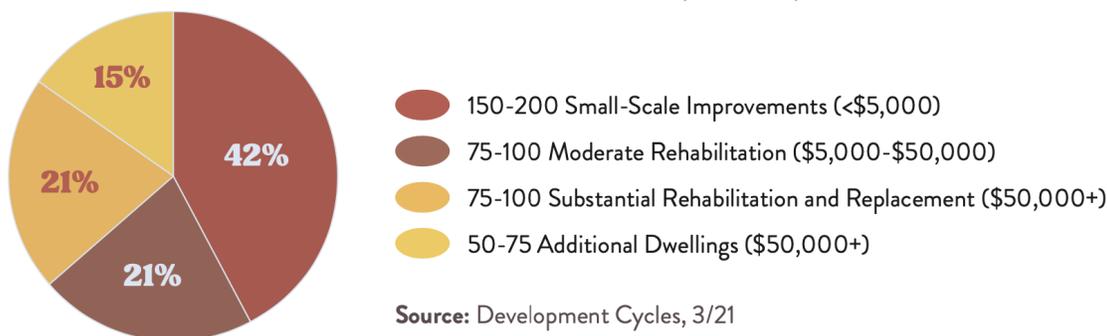
Agriculture is one industry that still provides onsite housing to employees, many of whom illegally reside in the country. Despite the fact that Vermont's dairy industry is at the center of the state's agricultural economy, the housing quality for migrant farmworkers is often overlooked. This issue is especially important since farmworkers are some of the people most in need of a safe, sanitary and comfortable place to live. Efficiency Vermont's Farm Labor Housing Initiative, led by Senior Consultant for Efficiency VT, Peter Schneider (Middlebury College Class of '97), is a project that aims to address the needs, challenges and emerging opportunities for improving migrant labor housing conditions. Additionally, these houses will contribute to a shift towards sustainable energy and infrastructure that will contribute to Vermont's climate and energy goals as outlined in the Global Warming Solutions Act. The purpose of this research is to engage with the perspectives of both the farmer and the migrant worker to seek common ground solutions that address the challenges that each constituent faces. Overall, we hope to demonstrate the efficacy of zero energy modular homes in satisfying the needs of both the farmer and migrant worker while simultaneously providing real-life accounts that emphasize the need for state and federal action towards farmworker justice.

## The Problem with Housing

There is an urgent need to address the state of migrant farmworker housing in Vermont. A quick look around will show that overcrowding, cleanliness, safety, temperature control and septic issues are just a few concerns that graze the top of a long list of worrisome conditions.

As a highly leveraged industry without many avenues for financial support for housing, agriculture—and, specifically, dairy farming—often must rely upon providing their workers with decades-old housing in desperate need of maintenance. These houses typically consist of trailers, mobile homes, or old farmhouses that lack reliable and efficient heating and ventilation; more often than not, these houses are also infested with pests such as rats, cockroaches and bedbugs. How is it that the individuals who [generate nearly 65%](#) of the state’s agricultural revenue are left in such deplorable conditions?

**FIGURE EX-1: SCALE OF FARMWORKER HOUSING NEEDS, BY TYPE, 2021 ESTIMATE**



**Fig. 1.** Development Cycles (2021). Figure Ex-1: Scale of Farmworker Housing Needs, By Type, 2021 Estimate. *Vermont Farmworker Housing Needs Assessment*, 4.

The scale of physical problems on farms varies. As shown in the Development Cycles figure above, improvements can range from costing less than \$5,000 to costing over \$50,000. Solutions do include small grants and grant packages from federal and state government, but the available funding is inadequate to address all of the needs. The ultimate goal must be to create widespread change that humanizes these workers.

The problem with migrant farmworker housing extends beyond that of physical conditions into issues of nationwide immigration laws, a slew of federal and state problems (from Visas to financial barriers) and, lastly, a question of caring and empathy.

For instance, dairy farms are unable to participate in the federal [H-2A program](#). The H-2A program allows farmers to legally bring migrant workers to the U.S. for temporary agricultural

work. However, since dairy farms are a year-long operation, they are excluded from the H-2A program. Exclusion from this program means that a majority of the migrant workers in the dairy industry are undocumented which brings about its own set of fears and challenges. On top of that, migrant farmworkers also make less than minimum wage, so it becomes virtually impossible for them to find or afford housing off the farm.

As you will hear in our interviews, farmers explain that they do not want their workers to be working under such stressful and adverse conditions, but they are financially constrained. Coupled with plummeting milk prices, perpetuated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the industry faces a lot of financial uncertainty and insecurity—housing is normally addressed last on the list of necessities.

It is clear that the migrant housing issue in Vermont is a complex, everchanging issue. To successfully effect statewide change, we need to start with a dialogue.

## **Zero Energy Modular Homes (ZEM)**

### *Technical information*

The particular Zero Energy Modular (ZEM) Homes we are discussing come out of [Efficiency Vermont's Modular Home Replacement Program](#). This program is open to any mobile homeowners but offers need-based incentives to create an equal opportunity for all buyers to own these homes.

Farmers looking to participate in this program and purchase a ZEM home can expect huge utility savings. [Zero energy](#) means that the amount of energy the home uses is equal to the amount it produces. As a result, monthly energy bills will equate to \$0. These ZEM homes are equipped with [ENERGY STAR®](#) certified appliances. ENERGY STAR® is one government standard of energy efficiency, so the appliances help the homeowner lessen their energy usage. The homes are also better insulated and come with [10-inch thick walls](#), minimizing the energy needed to heat or cool the home. With this improvement in structural climate control, these ZEM homes are sure to withstand any Vermont winter. At the same time, the resident's comfort will be insured by having a smart thermostat system that will regulate the home's temperature constantly.

Additionally, these are modular homes. [A modular home](#) is almost entirely built and assembled off-site, usually in a factory. That means that when it comes time to place the home on-site, the farmers do not have to deal with construction occurring on their farms, potentially disrupting operations. Instead, the homes are delivered to their farm, ready for some quick finishing touches to ground the home in its location.

### Pricing Estimates (2021):

Base Cost	\$120,000
Total Cost	\$194,000
Funding Sources	\$36,000
Total Cost, with Funding	\$158,000
Monthly Payment	\$500 to \$800

Source: Peter Schneider and Efficiency Vermont. "Example Farm Labor Housing Replacement Budget 2021."

The base cost for a ZEM home is currently around \$120,000. There are additional costs—sales tax, delivery, utility hook-ups, landscape services, etc.—that bring the total cost to approximately \$194,000. Current funding sources, such as the Efficiency Vermont incentive and grants from the Vermont Community Foundation and the Vermont Low Income Trust for Electricity ([VLITE](#)), can shave nearly \$36,000 off the total cost. The hope is to expand the reach of many funding sources so that farmers can benefit from even more financial incentives, grants, and subsidies. As it stands now with those three sources, the total cost of a ZEM is around \$158,000. Efficiency Vermont has flexible financing options, offering 25- to 30-year financing terms and interest rates

between 1.00% and 3.75%. Depending on the financing plan, a farmer can anticipate monthly mortgage payments between \$500 and \$800. Notably, because these are zero energy homes, the farmer is not concerned with a monthly energy bill and is instead only responsible for the mortgage payment each month.

### *Personal account*

The modular home our team visited was a comfortable setup suitable for a small family. Bedrooms on each end of the rectangular house were separated by an open kitchen area and living room, and a bathroom was located around the corner. Both the insulation and the ventilation system in these homes would contribute to a major increase in well-being for migrant farmworkers since these are two issues that are often observed in inadequate housing on farms. The rooftop solar panels provide an efficient source of energy for heating and electricity, reducing those costs without compromising comfort. Every farmworker we spoke with expressed to us how privacy was one of the most important aspects of a home. Upon sharing photos of the modular home to migrant farmworkers whom we were in contact with, we were able to get feedback on what changes could be made—such as larger individual bedrooms and a smaller common space—to better suit the needs of farmworkers sharing a living space.

## **Stories from the Source**

### ***Methods***

We began our background research by organizing Zoom meetings with individuals involved with the Farm Labor Housing Initiative and other organizations that are relevant to migrant labor and sustainable housing at the private and state level. Our three project partners — Peter Schneider (Senior Consultant at [VEIC](#) and [Efficiency Vermont](#), Middlebury Class of '97), Lise Anderson ([Addison Allies](#)) and John Ryan (VT Agricultural Development Program)— brought us up to speed and connected us to the ‘who’s-who’ of farmworker justice, research best practices, and existing studies. These meetings allowed us to understand the broader picture of migrant justice, migrant housing, and agricultural issues across the state. By meeting with key contacts from various organizations, such as [Milk with Dignity](#), we gained valuable insight into the specific challenges that stand in the way of proper housing for Vermont migrant farmworkers. Additionally, meeting with other local storytellers, such as Chris Urban and Andy Kolovos of the [Vermont Folklife Center](#), gave us inspiration and advice on how to tackle the storytelling aspect of the project. These meetings also gave us direction for who to reach out to first and what questions to explore before moving onto the second phase of interviews.

In the second phase of interviews, we reached out to farmers and migrant farmworkers to understand the challenges of obtaining adequate employee housing, and to identify farmworker needs from their perspectives. We hoped to hear the issues in their own words, so we enlisted help from Alan Moore, a translator working with Lise Anderson and Addison Allies, to guide us through several conversations. These vulnerable conversations ultimately enabled us to share voices that need to be heard, and also to directly address and integrate challenges and needs from each party into the greater Farm Labor Housing Initiative.

### *Farmworkers' Stories*

Conversations with farmworkers portray the physical conditions of housing and the emotional and mental toll it has on people. Workers share what makes them feel cared for, what they would like to see change, and their reactions to better housing. For the respect of the worker's identity and safety, these interviews omit all names, and details surrounding the farms they work on and will remain anonymous.

### *Farmers' Stories*

Conversations with farmers frame the financial challenges and other barriers they often face when it comes to building new housing. Farmers explain their relationship to their workers, expand upon and reveal misunderstandings about themselves and their workers in the public eye, and describe how they feel about the ZEM housing project.

### *Other Stories*

**Nathan Cleveland & Shaun Gilpin ([Vermont Community Development Program](#)):** Nathan and Shaun helped us to better understand the financial intricacies and challenges that current federal and state legislation poses, while also providing us with some foundational knowledge about farming in Vermont.

**Chris Urban (Storyteller, Creator of ["The Golden Cage"](#)):** We turned to Chris for advice on the creation of our case study. Chris composed a multimedia project, "The Golden Cage" (associated with the Vermont Folklife Center), that gives an inside look at the lives of migrant farmworkers in Vermont. Chris' work has served as the inspiration for our final project, so it was helpful to talk with him about the creative aspects of his project and also how best to prepare for our conversations with the migrant workers. Chris shared with us what he wished he did differently and gave us suggestions on how to approach our own conversations given such a short time period for the project.

**Tom Fritzsche (Executive Director, [Milk with Dignity](#)):** Tom has a wealth of knowledge about the intersections of farm labor housing and migrant justice. Speaking with Tom helped us to comprehend Milk with Dignity's mission to centralize the farmworkers in the process of building collaborative relationships that help foster adequate working and housing conditions.

**Andy Kolovos (Artist, Associate Director, [Vermont Folklife Center](#)):** Andy is a folklorist and archivist (ethnographer), whose work has centered around migrant workers in Vermont. He had valuable insights about storytelling, and how we can humanize the workers and amplify their stories, while also honoring the need for privacy. One thing Andy and Chris both touched on was putting in effort to make this a collaborative process, one in which we really include the migrant workers in the process of telling their stories. In other words, not just interviewing them and walking away, but actively listening to what they have to say, leaving space for them to ask us questions, and continuing communication even after the interviews.

**John Laggis (Vermont Dairy Farmer, part of [Milk with Dignity](#)):** As a Milk with Dignity farmer who is in the process of upgrading his employee housing unit to a ZEM home, we saw John as a great model for learning about the lengthy process and the challenges he faced. He

knew his farmworker housing was in need of an upgrade, and the savings in energy costs that would come with a ZEM modular home were very appealing. He shared with us his negative experience of trying to get funding through the USDA — a loan analyst must look at the farmer's finances, land ownership, housing design and engineering, housing budget and more. John also highlighted his wish for migrant farmworkers to be able to integrate into the community better but highlighted the need for government immigration regulations to improve before that can truly happen.

**John Roberts (Executive Director, [Champlain Valley Farmer Coalition](#)):** The Champlain Valley Farmer Coalition (CVFC) encompasses some of the biggest farms in the state, so speaking with John about the Coalition was of high importance. John, a retired dairy farmer and former employee of the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, recently became the first executive director of CVFC. He shared his experiences with migrant farm workers, both as a farmer and state employee. From his time as a farmer, John expressed the importance of migrant farmworkers in the agriculture industry; he said the industry could not survive longer than a few weeks without migrant labor. And as a state employee, John traveled to farms throughout Vermont. He detailed the poor conditions he witnessed migrant workers living in and harped on the lack of support for migrant labor given current immigration laws.

**Liz Gleason (Director, [VT Farm & Forest Viability Program](#)):** Liz's position in a state program means that her focus is to bring life to projects like the ZEM houses at the public level. Liz explained that her biggest challenge was figuring out how to direct public funding and awareness to something like the Farm Labor Housing Initiative. She mentioned that two additional challenges that farmworker housing faces are 1) there is little enforcement of building codes and 2) there is no proper funding on the federal level — while there are programs, they are effectively useless if the criteria to get support cannot be met by the people who are hired for these jobs. Meeting with Liz broadened our understanding of the difficulties facing both the farmworkers, farmers, and people looking to help both of them as a result of insufficient federal avenues.

## **What Does this Mean for Housing?**

Ensuring the adequacy of migrant worker housing is an essential part of keeping the dairy industry afloat. With milk sales making up approximately [65% of total agricultural sales](#) in Vermont, it is important that dairy farmers and farmworkers receive the financial help they desperately need from federal and local state governments. In his *Farmworker Housing Needs Assessment*, John Ryan outlined 12 goals, two of which we believe our website highlights: “Continue Dialogue” and “Educate.” We want to educate people on the human needs of both the farmworker and the farmer, who have both openly shared their honest perspectives with us on the myriad of challenges they face. In shedding light on both the economic and emotional burdens of the farmworker and farmer, we know these modular homes will address some of these challenges if proper funding is provided.

Both of the farmers with whom we spoke expressed that economic pressures and fluctuating milk prices have caused farms to consolidate and, in some cases, to go out of business. One farmer explained that her “milk check from December to last month *dropped 40k dollars per month*, so it’s a per-month difference.” She said, “all the milk that I sell this month, I won’t know what I’m getting paid until next month, but I have already bought all the feed and the supplies to sell that, but I won’t know the price until the following month. And that’s based on sales across the country.” As a result of these financial barriers, [fewer than 650 Vermont dairy farms remain in the state compared to 4,017 dairy farms in 1969](#). What would the state of Vermont look like if these lands were bought up and developed?

Dairy farms, which operate on [52% of Vermont’s farmland](#), are an important part of Vermont's identity and aesthetic appeal. More importantly, agriculture is an industry necessary for the survival of our food system. Without migrant farmworkers there is no workforce to produce the dairy products we collectively consume. John Roberts, Executive Director of Champlain Valley Farmer Coalition exclaimed, “We’d solve our immigration problem in this country very quickly if I could snap my fingers and make [the migrant workers] all disappear for two weeks because it would bring this country to its knees.”

The successful labor of farmworkers is dependent on their housing, which is hardly galvanized as a main priority since there is always something on the farm that requires money to repair. Given the exclusionary nature of immigration laws in this country, it is important that workers feel safe and respected by the farmers. This is not easily achieved, given the language barriers and the fact that farmers cannot always attend to fixing housing conditions (especially on account of the fluctuating prices of milk and constraints of the dairy industry). One farmer mentioned how demands such as replacing machinery take precedence over housing because the farm can’t function for very long without equipment.

We have talked with many workers who believe the lack of attention to decent farmworker housing suggests that farmers don't care about their wellbeing: "All they care about is that the parlor is functioning and that their cows are milking." Farmworkers believe it is the responsibility of farmers to provide decent housing to their employees, while farmers express the difficulty in prioritizing farmworker housing given their financial crunches.

Energy efficient modular homes will simultaneously help both constituents by cutting energy costs for farmers and granting workers the respect they rightfully deserve and the rest they urgently need to keep the dairy industry alive for all of us. More importantly, and possibly the most overlooked benefit, is the relational nature of these housing units that will allow workers to feel like farmers value their presence in a country that continues to invalidate their existence.

Ultimately, we learned that we must practice listening with our whole hearts and continue asking critical questions like, *how can we help farmers recognize the more relational benefits of new housing in addition to the economic benefits?* We hope that our project can serve as a starting point for expanding the notion of what farmworker housing means to farmers. With these tangible, human accounts that show a need for change, we know that the Farm Labor Housing Initiative can experience even greater success with funding sources at the private and state level while also being able to create direct conversations with the people these houses would impact the most.

There is a need for improved farmworker housing, support for agriculture, and support for migrant justice in Vermont. We need a future where farms can provide safe, sustainable housing and where farmworkers are treated with respect.

### **Additional Resources**

#### **Reports**

[Vermont Farmworker Housing Needs Assessment](#) (John Ryan and Jennifer Lenz, Development Cycles)

[Milk with Dignity First Biennial Report: 2018-2019](#) (Migrant Justice and Milk with Dignity Standards Council)

[Examining Vermont State Spending on the Dairy Industry from 2010 to 2019](#) (Vermont State Auditor's Office)

#### **Articles**

[Issue Spotlight: Improving housing conditions for migrant farmworkers](#) (Sara Fleming, VAHC Blog)

[Report: Vermont spent \\$285 million over 10 years supporting dairy industry](#) (Ellie French, VTDigger)

[In Vermont, a new model for migrant farmworker housing](#) (David Thill, Energy News Network)

[Report shows migrant farmworkers live in insufficient housing](#) (Katie Jickling, VTDigger)

[States Struggle to Provide Housing for Migrant Farmworkers](#) (Teresa Wiltz, The Pew Charitable Trusts)

### **Radio**

[What's It Like To Be A Migrant Worker In Vermont?](#) (Angela Evancie and Kathleen Masterson, VPR)

[VPR: Migrant Workers Collection](#)

### **Other Projects**

[The Golden Cage — Vermont Folklife Center](#) (Chris Urban)

### **Organizations & Foundations**

[Migrant Justice](#)

[Vermont Community Foundation](#)

[Vermont Housing and Conservation Board \(VHCB\)](#)

[Mobile Home Replacement Program \(Efficiency Vermont\)](#)

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