

# **Migrant Dairy Farmworker Workplace Safety and On-Farm Housing Projects in Vermont**

**Presented to the Vermont House Agriculture Committee**

**Dan Baker, PhD  
University of Vermont  
Dept of Community Development & Applied Economics  
University of Vermont Extension**

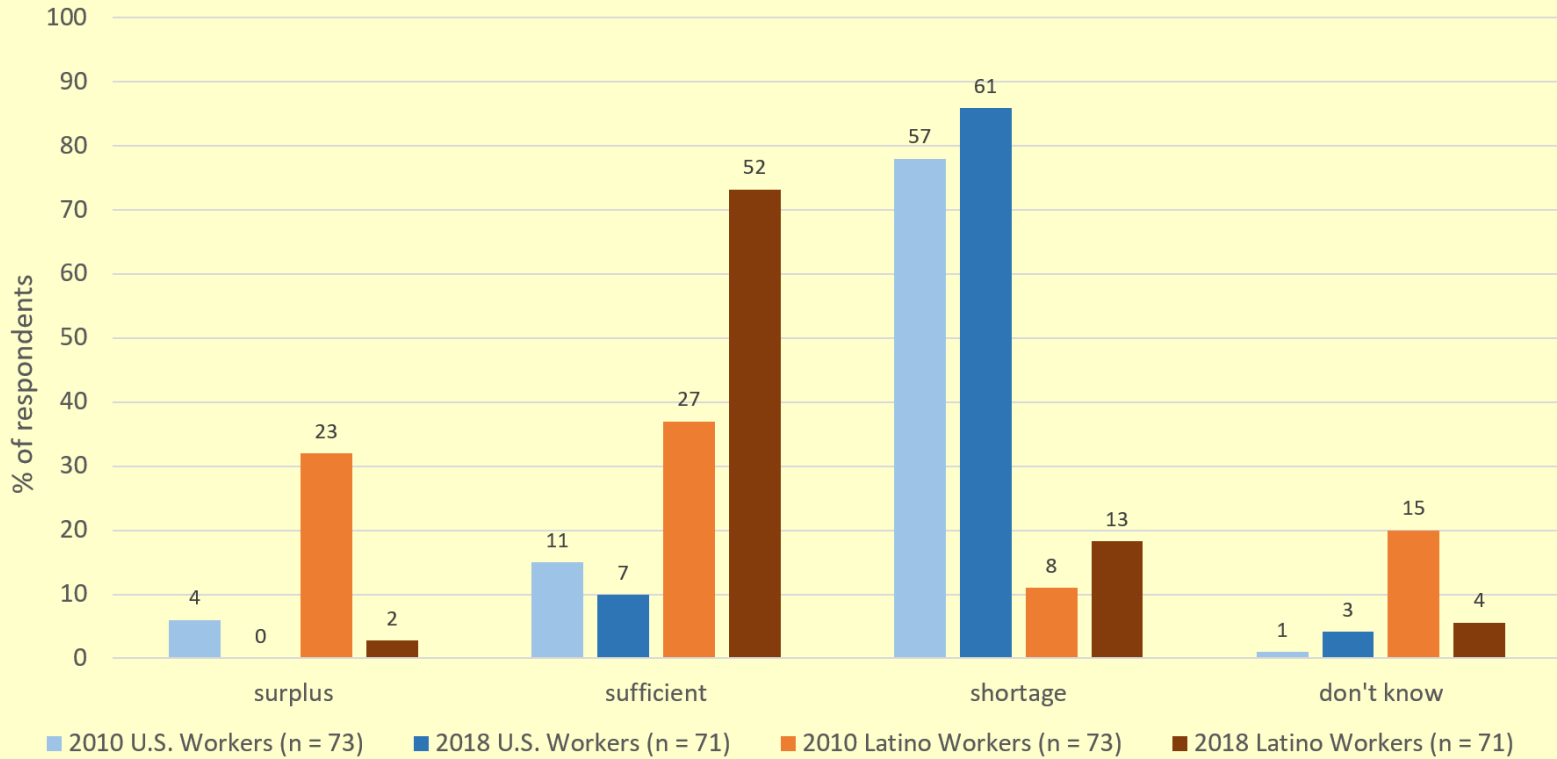
**March 19, 2025**



*The University of Vermont*

# Vermont Dairy's chronic shortage of labor:

Labor Supply for U.S. and Latino Workers



## Farms hiring Latinxs:

In 2010:

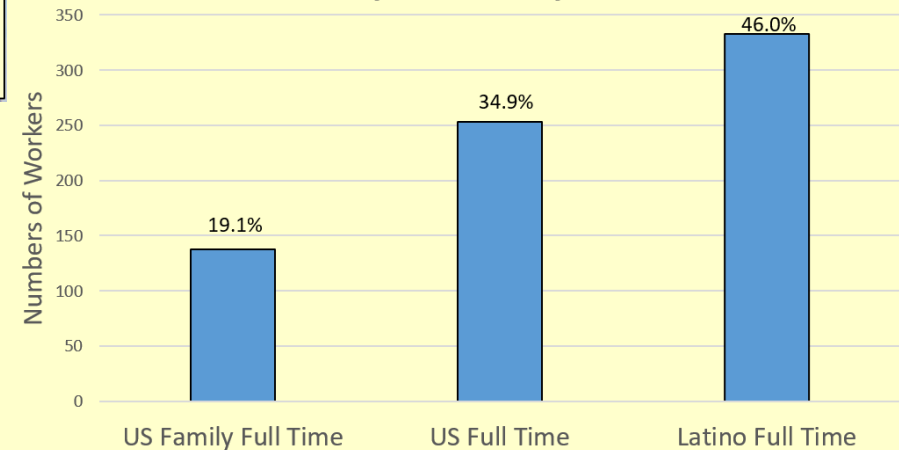
56% of farms surveyed hired Latinx workers

In 2018:

94% of farms surveyed hired Latinx workers

2018: Of the 586 non-family farmworkers employed 57% were Latinx

Farm Labor 2018  
71 Farms  
724 family & non-family workers



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## Current and Recent Farmworker Projects

- Research projects in 2016 and 2018/19 on migrant dairy farmworker stress
  - High levels of stress compared to other published studies
  - Concern about being injured on farms among top stressors in both surveys
- Migrant Dairy Farmworker Safety (funded by the Northeast Dairy Business Innovation Center)
- Farmworker Housing (in partnership with Champlain Housing Trust, funded by the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board)
- Farmworker Mental Health (in partnership with Naomi Wolcott-MacCausland, UVM Extension Bridges to Health. Funded by the Farmer and Rancher Stress Network (FRSAN) and the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets)



## Context for farmworker housing: farmworker demographics

- 500 seasonal (H2A visa) workers, primarily from Jamaica
- 925 year-round migrant workers and families
  - Working on ~150 farms
  - 93-95% in Vermont are from Mexico
  - 75% (n=100) report speaking little to no English
  - Median age 28.5 (n=100)
  - Majority are young men
  - Increasing % are women
  - Recent increase in children on farms

Turn-over between farms varies widely

- Some farms experience high turn-over and other farms employ the same workers over many years

Housing is one important factor in turnover



# Findings from 2 research projects in 2016 and 2018/19: Primary Stressors for Vermont Latinx Dairy Workers

- Migration related issues (higher than other migrant farmworker studies)
- Concern about being injured on a dairy farm (6<sup>th</sup> highest concern in 2016 and 2018/19)
  - More than 40% of respondents (n=67) were moderately or extremely stressed about being injured)
- Other stressors relate to social isolation
  - -- Being away from family, friends and community
  - -- Not being able to speak English or be understood when speaking Spanish



# Farm Health and Safety Project



STATE OF VERMONT

Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets

## NORTHEAST DAIRY BUSINESS INNOVATION CENTER

- **200 farmworkers interviewed in Vermont and New York**
  - 100 farmworkers on 58 farms in 12 counties in Vermont
  - 100 farmworkers on 32 farms in New York
- **Farmworker safety trainings were provided on 41 farms**
  - 334 farmworkers attended trainings (including 170 workers in Vermont)
- **Regional Spanish-Language Discussion Meetings on Farm Safety and Mental Health**
- **Bilingual Research Roundtable to share findings with stakeholders**



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Photo 1: A 23-year-old Hispanic laborer died after being crushed between the frame of a skid steer loader and the scraper attachment on the loader lift arms at a rendering plant. The manual and warning signs at the site were available in English only.

Photo Source: [Sanders-Smith, Purdue 2007](#)



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# 2022-2022 Farmworker Interviews

- 200 farmworkers interviewed in Vermont and New York
  - 100 farmworkers on 58 farms in 12 counties in Vermont
  - 100 farmworkers on 32 farms in New York

77% Mexico

20% Chiapas (29% of Vermont interviewees)

11% Veracruz

11% Puebla

10% Tabasco

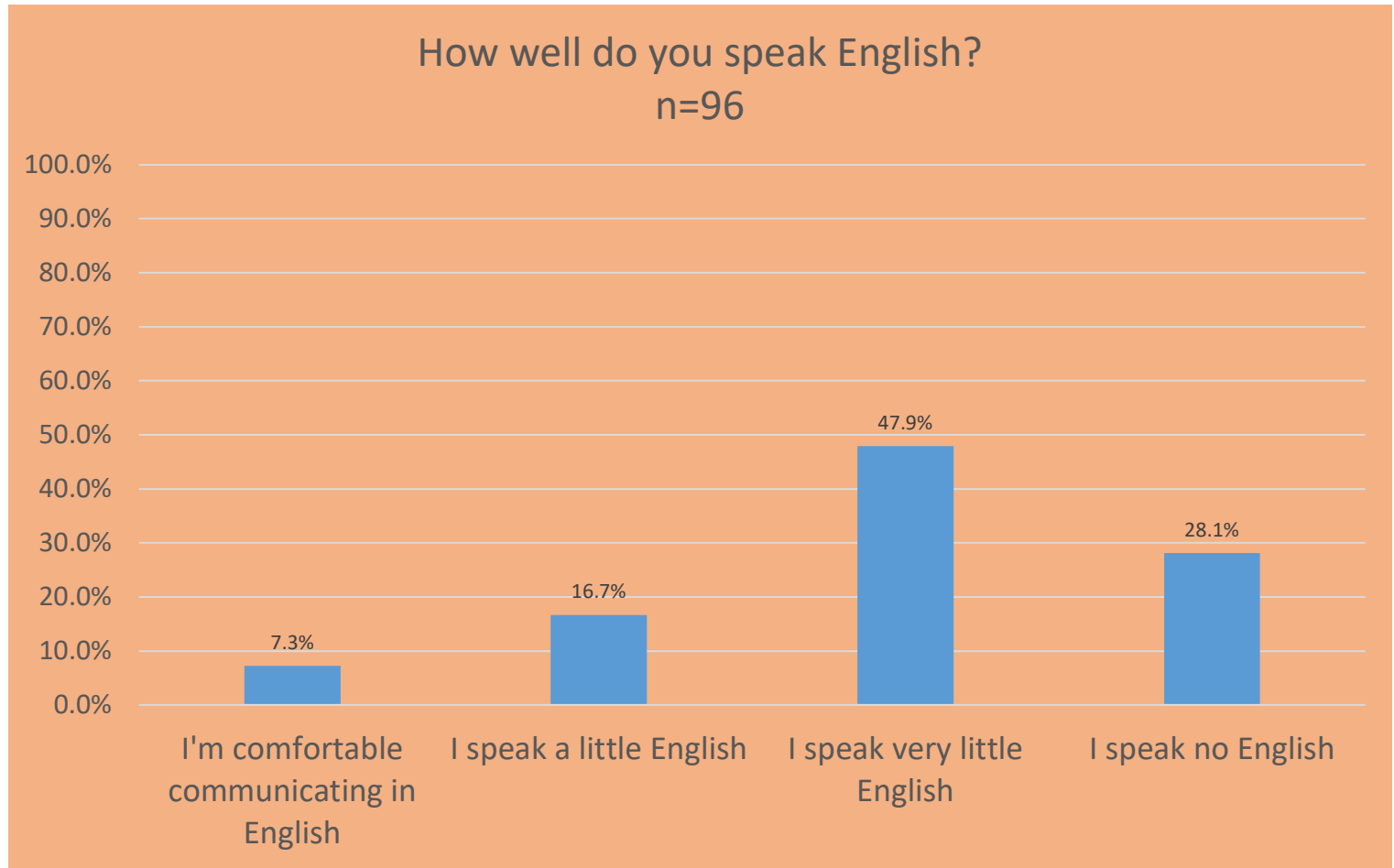
23% Guatemala

12% from Huehuetenango (22% of NY interviewees)



Map: Google Earth





**61% of workers said that their level of English affected their ability to work safely  
Of those, 14.6% said they felt it was a significant safety issue**





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## Context for On-Farm Injuries

**“Agriculture ranks among the most hazardous industries. Farmers are at very high risk for fatal and nonfatal injuries; and farming is one of the few industries in which family members (who often share the work and live on the premises) are also at risk for fatal and nonfatal injuries.”**

**“In 2020, there were 11,880 injuries in agricultural production that required days away from work, however, there is well-known underreporting of injuries in this industry.”**

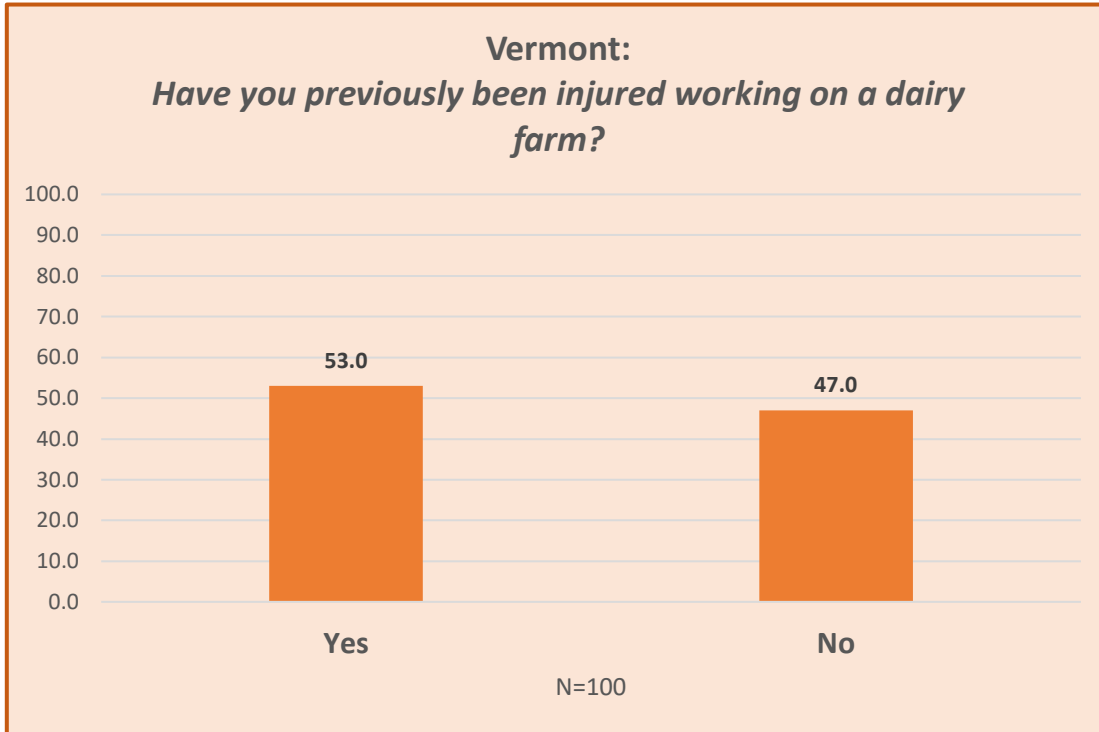
--- [National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health](#)

**Migrant dairy farmworkers face multiple challenges working in agriculture:**

- Limited English
- Variable provision of job training
- Multiple background stressors
- Long hours at repetitive tasks with large animals



# Vermont Farmworker Injuries



**Most farmworkers reported being injured more than once**

31% still suffer from an injury

For the first injury reported, 52% had to see a doctor

The farmer paid 66%, with 17% covered by the Open Door Clinic (n=29)

**42% missed work due to injury**

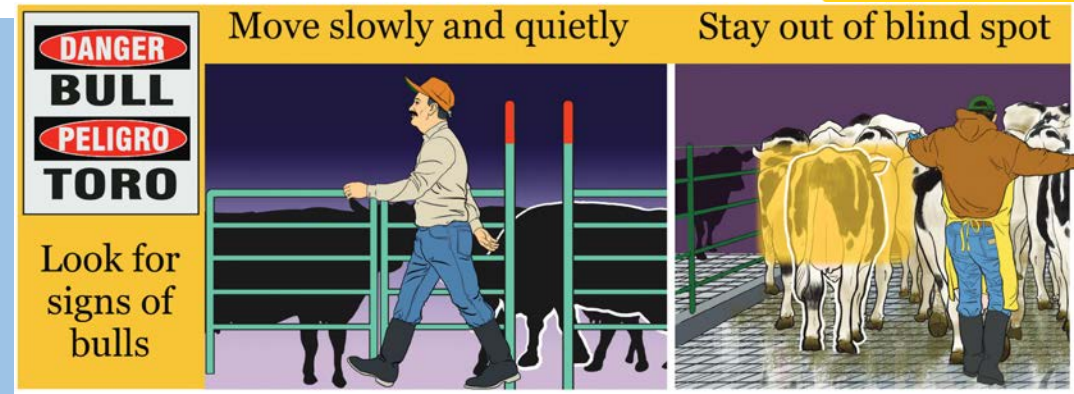
For the 21 workers who missed more than 3 days of work, 12 (57%) were paid during that recovery time

*For comparison, in NY the 16 workers who were out of work for 3 days or more, 80% were paid for that time*



# Prior Farm safety training in Vermont has been lacking

- **59%** of farmworkers received some safety training when they began work on their current farm in Vermont
  - **75%** received training in NY
    - Scale of farms → Increased OSHA regulation
- Of all Vermont workers who had previous safety training
  - **52%** were trained by a co-worker
  - **22%** by the farmer
  - **12%** by a professional

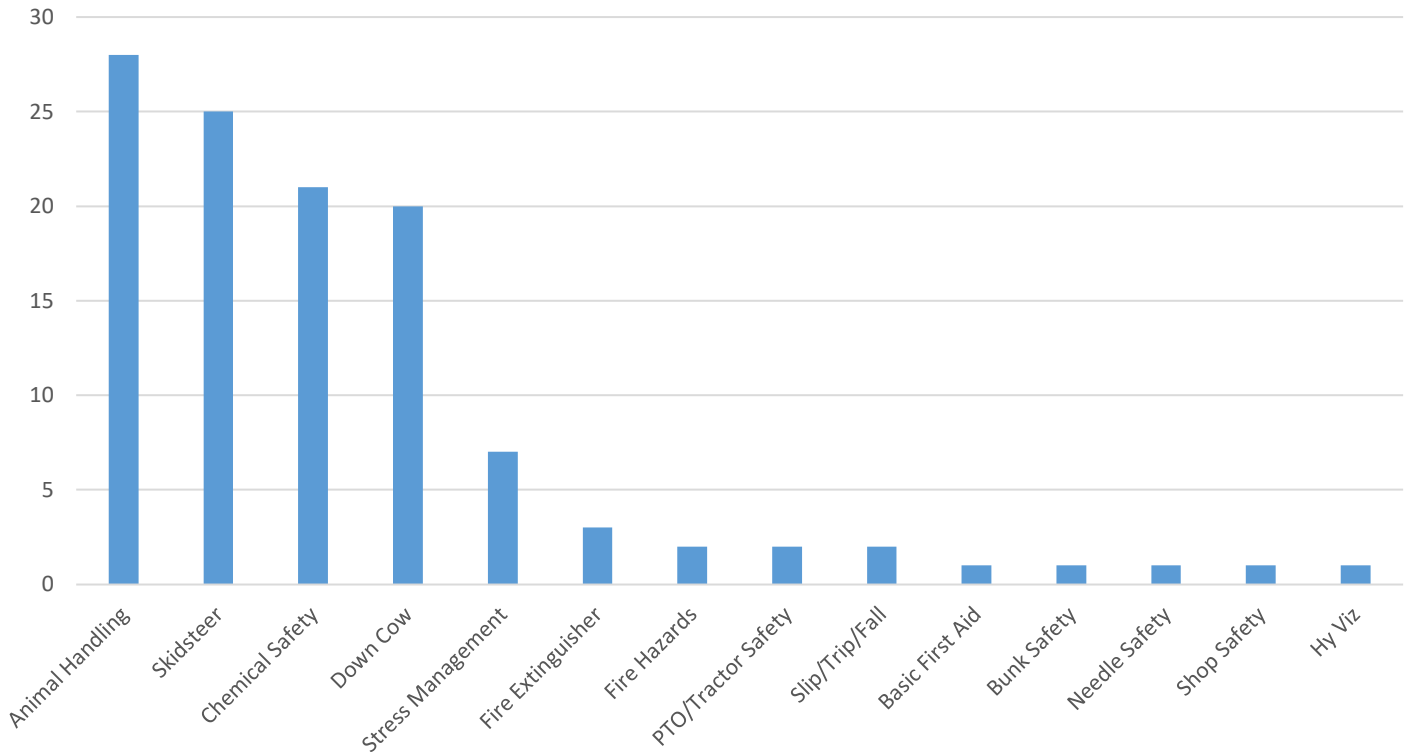


**89% (n=100) said they would be interested in additional safety training**



# Farm Safety Trainings Delivered

Trainings Delivered Per Farmer Request



**On farm bi-lingual safety trainings on 41 farms**

334 farmworkers attended trainings (including 170 workers in Vermont)

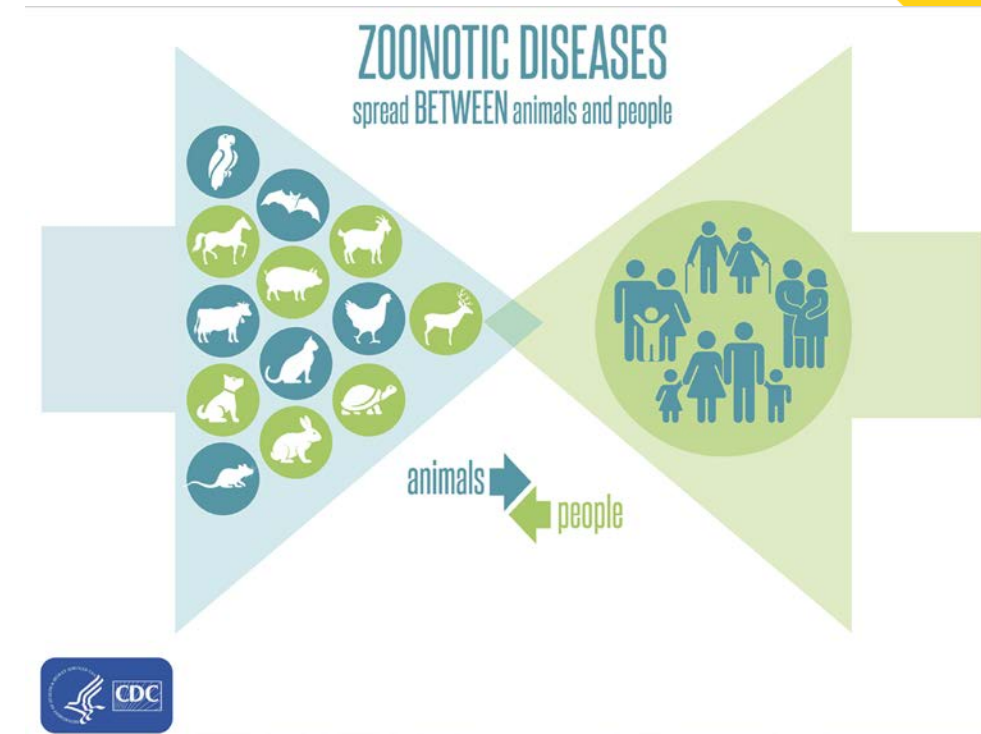


Photo source: Dan Baker



# Migrant workers are interested in a broader range of training & agricultural information

- Animal to human disease transmission (zoonotic disease)
  - 75% have never received any information on zoonotic disease while working in dairy
  - 53% are very interested and 43% are somewhat interested in receiving training



Graphic: [CDC One Health](#)



## Are you interested in learning about personal practice to manage and reduce stress?

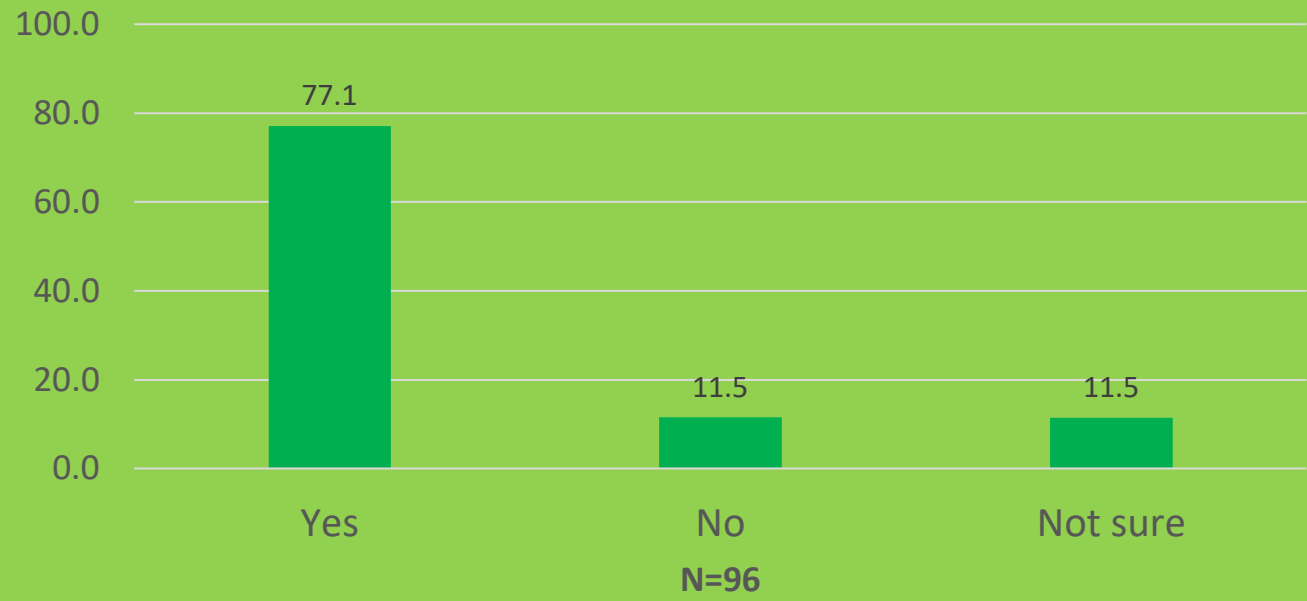


Photo source: Dan Baker



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# Assessment of Mental Health Services for Migrant Farmworkers in Vermont

## Mental Health Continuum Model



World Health Organization Definition of Mental Health "is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community."

**Majority of mental health services in Vermont are in focused on the "thriving" end of the spectrum:**

- Health care prevention and access to health services
- Food security
- Education
- Workers Rights
- Access to resources
- Housing
- Workplace safety

Source: MacCausland & Baker, 2023

## Selected key findings – access and utilization of mental health services

- **Work place conditions, compounded by social and structural determinants, cause migrant farmworker stress while also limiting opportunities to maintain positive mental health and wellbeing.**
- **Availability, access, and utilization of mental health promotion activities and counseling services tailored to migrant farmworkers has been inconsistent due to reliance on grant funding, raising issues for sustainability and reliable, trustworthy patient care.**
- **There are extremely limited accessible and sustained options for mental health services for migrant farmworkers within the health care system in Vermont.**
- **Migrant farmworkers and their family members will utilize mental health counseling services if they are free, provided by Spanish speakers and transportation issues are addressed.**

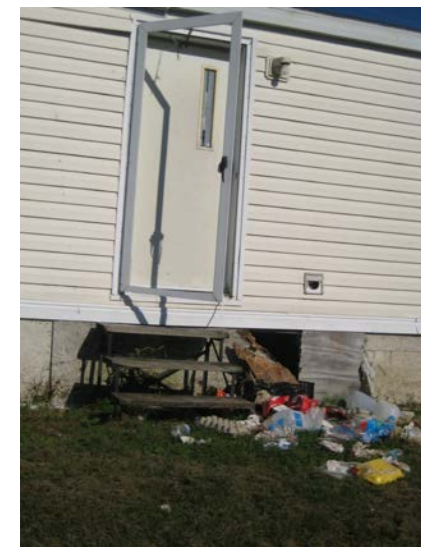




# Farmworker Housing Project

Housing is one of the most common non-wage benefits provided to workers on dairy farms (*Dairy Farmer Survey, n=71, 2018*)

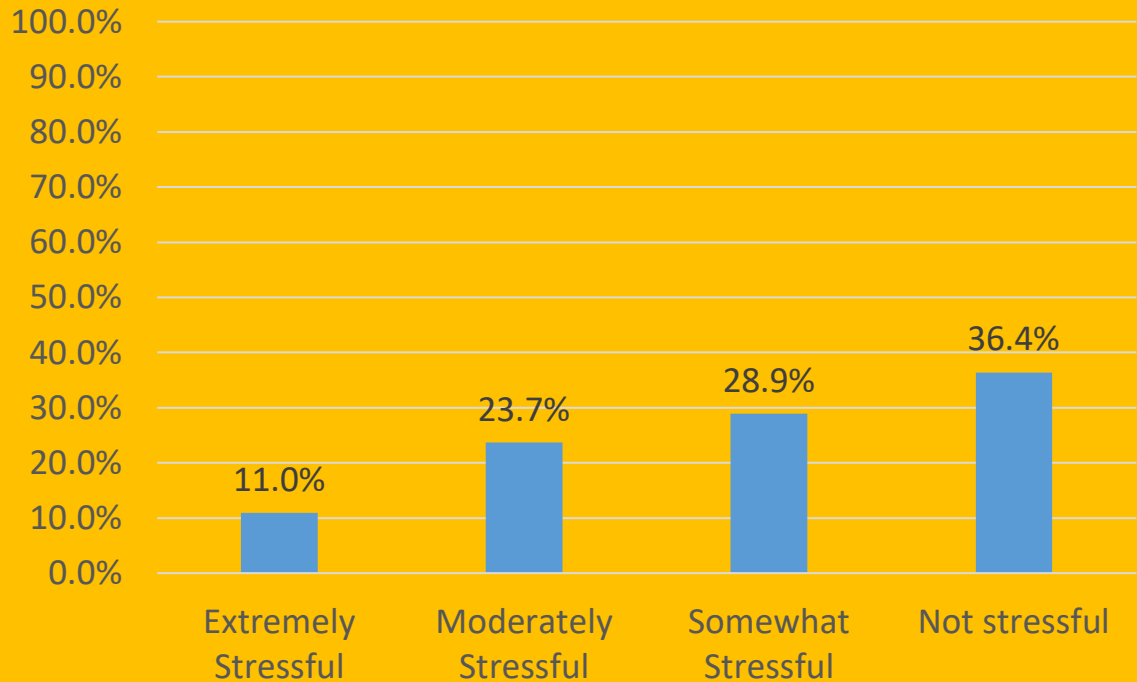
Latino Workers	100% received housing and utilities
US Workers	Housing provided by 62% of farms, Utilities provided by 53% of farms



# Vermont Dairy Farmworker Housing Stress

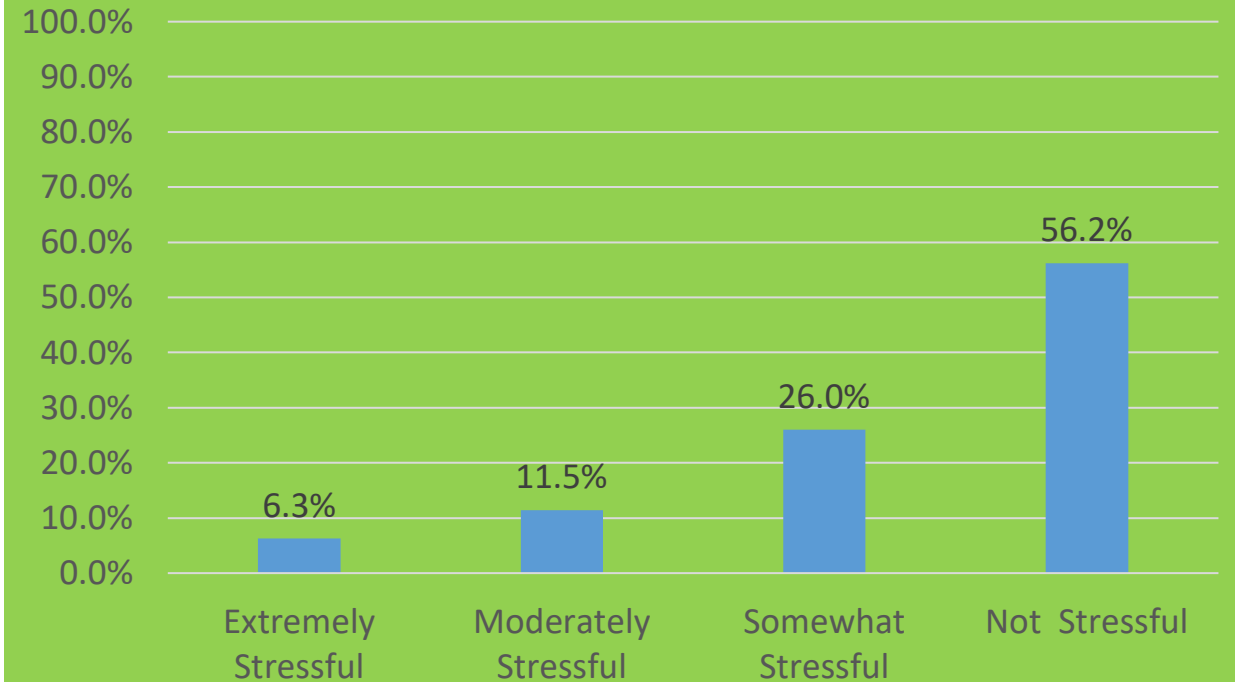
Sometimes I feel that my housing is inadequate

2016  
n=173



Sometimes I feel that my housing is inadequate

2022-2023  
N=96



# Vermont Farmworker Housing Program

- Funding provided by the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board
- Champlain Housing Trust is the lead agency
- UVM Extension does outreach and engagement to farmers and farmworkers
- Two programs:
  - Housing Repairs
  - Housing Replacements



# Current Status of Repair Projects

Project Status	# of units	# of beneficiaries
Complete	19	69
Under Construction	22	89
Closing and Committed	27	91
Site Visit and Applied	9	33
All (Applied to Complete)	77	282

**Key to success of the programs has been listening to feedback and evolving the program to address issues**



# Farm 1- Before



# Farm 1- After



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## Communication is essential and a challenge: Stories about plumbing and smoke alarms



## Migrant Farmworker Research Roundtable at UVM



Bi-lingual conference

Morning Session Research and Project Outcomes

Afternoon session discussion:

*Everyone agrees that farmworkers should be safe at work, from moral and ethical to practical reasons. How we get to the place where all farmworkers experience good, safe, healthy workplaces and living conditions. that is the question. As farmers, farmworkers, dairy industry representatives, service providers and advocates what strategies do you support to get us to that place?*

**Most common response: Greater collaboration through a coalition approach**





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## Conclusions & Recommendations

- Dairy Farms depend on migrant farmworkers, here in Vermont and across the US.
  - To date immigration enforcement on dairies has not spiked
  - There is no Plan B were dairies to lose this critical labor force
- Key services that have supported migrant farmworkers are under threat from budget and staffing cuts.
  - Loss of these services could have profound effects on farmworker well-being
  - Greater coordination and collaboration between groups would be beneficial
- We have made progress designing and implementing effective programs to support migrant farmworkers in Vermont. Most of these programs were underfunded prior to the federal budget cuts. Continued state support for these programs will be essential to maintain this progress.



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- Questions and Comments?

