



TEXAS LOW INCOME HOUSING INFORMATION SERVICE

HOUSING MATTERS

A newsletter dedicated to the goal that every Texan should have decent, safe, affordable housing

Preview of upcoming report...

Substandard housing plagues Texas Panhandle farm workers

The Texas Low Income Housing Information Service has completed a two-year investigation into the living conditions of farm workers in the South Plains region of the Texas Panhandle. This newsletter is a preview of a report that will be released on DVD later this year.


Farm workers, who are among the poorest families in Texas, are also some of the hardest working individuals. They are essential to our state's economy. The President's recent immigration proposal to revive the guest worker program will bring many more farm workers to Texas. Our investigation has documented living conditions among farm workers that are unacceptable and a supply of housing that is inadequate to meet even existing needs.

There was the time, about 40 years ago, when many who were concerned about the poor in America looked at the plight of migrant farm workers and were hopeful. Those were the days of the CBS documentary "Harvest of Shame" when Edward R. Murrow brought the farm workers' lives into our living rooms and Cesar Chavez was organizing the United Farm Workers Union.

But past hopes for progress have been unfulfilled.

We were once a nation of agricultural workers with 90 percent of Americans living on farms. Those days are long gone as farming has become agribusiness and there is a growing separation between consumers and producers, especially where production involves physical work or hand labor.

Texas has one of the largest number of migrant and seasonal farm workers in the nation. Labor



A time for action
Farm labor housing in Texas
 The crisis in housing for farm workers in the Texas Panhandle and solutions

The full report (shown above) will be released on DVD later this year. To reserve a copy of the DVD report, e-mail john@texashousing.org

experts describe migrant farm workers as traveling in three major migrant streams – western, central, and eastern. These streams begin respectively in California, Texas, and Florida – where workers usually have their home base and where they spend the winter. In the central stream, migrants travel north out of South Texas to other parts of the state and some migrate on to states in the Midwest and West, working in Arizona, Colorado, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan.

According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, there were a total of 362,724 migrant and home based farm workers and family members in the state of Texas

in the year 2000. Nearly sixty percent of Texas farm workers reside in the four southernmost counties of the Rio Grande Valley. Most Valley farm workers live in rural colonias during the winter. Another twenty-one percent of Texas farm workers and their family members live in the South Plains region of the Texas Panhandle.

Much attention has been devoted to the living conditions in colonias in South Texas. Some initial, if inadequate, steps have been undertaken to address these conditions. But the conditions in the South Plains regions of the Panhandle, and in particular in farm labor camps and so-called "non-border colonias," are yet to be addressed. These are the conditions we investigate in the report.

Seeking a solution

A Texas Farm Worker Housing Summit will be held at the Austin Marriott at the Capitol on November 9-10. The summit will assess farm worker housing needs and discuss solutions. The Summit is hosted by Motivation, Education & Training, Inc. (a farm worker service organization) and is co-sponsored by TxLIHIS. For information contact Kathy Tyler at kytyler@austin.rr.com.

Summary of TxLIHIS' farm worker housing investigation

Farm worker income

Seasonal farm workers are the poorest workers in the United States, earning an average of \$6,500 dollars each year. Migrant farm workers average only \$5,000 per year. Given these income levels, farm workers have very few choices when it comes to affording housing.

Farm worker profile

Most farm workers are men, although many women also labor in the fields. Forty percent of migrant children work in the fields beside their parents and the money they earn is an important part of the families' income.

Many farm workers are immigrants from other countries and the vast majority of immigrant farm workers – over 90 percent – are from Mexico. Nationally, it is believed that at least one in four migrants lacks working papers, although the percentage of undocumented workers in many regions is far higher.

Housing for migrant farm workers

Migrant farm workers have special needs related to their continual movement. When arriving in a new community, migrant workers must find temporary housing, either in labor camps provided by their employers, in government farm labor housing, or in short-term private rental housing.

The Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs identifies farm workers as a “special needs” population. The State Low Income Housing Plan notes that:

“...farm workers have a particularly difficult time finding available, affordable housing because of extremely low and sporadic incomes and mobility. Most of the small, rural communities where migrant workers may seek employment do not have the rental units available for the seasonal influx. In addition, migrant workers may not be able to afford security deposits, pass credit checks, or commit to long-term leases. Overcrowding and substandard housing are significant housing problems for farm workers.”

Housing for home-based farm workers

Home-based farm workers also face problems with housing. Their problems stem from their low pay, which is often insufficient to buy or rent a decent house. Many live in old, dilapidated trailers without access to proper water or sewer facilities. In most areas where farm workers live there is little or no government subsidized housing for low-income families. Where it exists farm worker housing is sometimes in need of rehabilitation.

Inadequate, substandard government housing

As the winter home of 60% of the farm workers in Texas, the colonias of South Texas are a relatively well known phenomenon. Yet housing conditions for farm workers in other parts of Texas have gone virtually unnoticed.



Grower-owned housing such as this in Hale County in the Panhandle are often in poor, unsanitary condition due to the lack of state inspections.

The South Plains region of the Texas Panhandle, an area generally about 100 miles on either side of a line running between Lubbock and Amarillo, is one of the most productive agricultural regions in the nation. According to the US Census, more than 76,000 farm workers and their family members live in this region. Our research found that the region contains the largest concentration of substandard farm worker housing in the US outside of the colonias of South Texas. Each year the conditions are growing worse.

The substandard conditions affect both migrant farm workers who come to the South Plains temporarily to work during the growing season as well as the permanent farm workers who live there year-round.

The only specific government response to farm worker housing needs is the US Department of Agriculture's Farm



At least 25% of the government sponsored farm worker housing in the Panhandle such as this apartment in Floydada, Texas is in poor condition.

Labor Housing Program. But on the South Plains, no new farm labor housing has been built under this program in 11 years and no new housing for migrant farm workers has been built in more than 35 years. Despite having the second largest number of farm workers in the state, Texas' supply of USDA farm labor housing lags far behind many other states in the number and quality of housing units.

There are a total of only 699 rental housing units in the Texas South Plains built under the US Department of Agriculture's Farm Labor Housing Program. With 76,000 farm workers in the region there are more than 100 farm workers for every one of these apartments. Even more problematic, we estimate that 25% of these units are so run down that they are uninhabitable.

Primitive grower-owned labor camps

Some growers built their own housing for farm workers in what is known as "grower-owned labor camps." Much of this housing is primitive. In 1971 the Texas Legislature passed a law establishing minimum standards for private housing that growers provide their workers. The Texas Department of Health was charged with licensing and inspecting this housing. However, the state's farm worker housing standards were set extremely low. For example, bathrooms are not required in the individual units. There are currently 35 grower-owned labor camps licensed by the Texas Department of Health in the Texas South Plains.

We observed many grower-owned units in an advanced state of deterioration. Local Headstart workers reported many problems in one labor camp, including an inadequate water supply and infants suffering from rat bites. This camp is operating under a license issued by the Texas Department of Health despite that fact that the required on-site state inspection had not been conducted due to state budget cutbacks.

At another state licensed grower-owned camp we found a concrete block apartment building with no indoor bathrooms. There were shared toilets and showers in a separate building. At the time we visited there had been no water available for the past 24 hours.

Expanding non-border colonias

Substandard conditions and a limited supply of grower-owned and government-sponsored housing have forced farm workers to seek housing in the private market.

For most this means a dilapidated trailer or makeshift house. This type of housing has sprung up in many areas of the Panhandle in communities that are being called "non-border colonias" – areas that suffer from a lack of proper infrastructure and poor housing just like in the border colonias of South Texas.



Informal labor camp of migrant farm workers in the city of Tulia, Texas.

Texas South Plains farm worker facts:

- 76,000 farm workers live in the South Plains.
- There are less than 700 public farm worker apartments.
- More than 25% of the government housing is uninhabitable.



Home-based farm workers in the Panhandle have settled in "non-border colonias" such as this one outside the city of Plainview, Texas.



Seeking solutions to the Texas farm worker housing crisis

The good news is that there are solutions to Texas' farm worker housing problems. We will provide a detailed plan in our forthcoming report.

Motivation, Education & Training, Inc. (MET) and TxLIHIS are convening a Texas Farm Worker Housing Summit to:

- assess the need for both migrant and seasonal farm worker housing in Texas;
- assess the degree to which that need is currently being met both in terms of quantity and quality of the housing;
- identify resources that might be brought to bear on the needs;
- evaluate and recommend how those resources might be marshaled to most effectively address the concerns expressed in the State Low Income Housing Plan.

We observed that there is a paralyzing combination of a lack of market data on the farm worker housing deficit, a neglect of most of the existing farm worker housing, and a lack of local initiative to deal with the obvious substandard living conditions.

The solution should achieve three things:

- 1) Fix or rebuild the deteriorated government sponsored farm labor housing developments.
- 2) Inspect and enforce state building standards in all grower-owned farm labor housing camps.



The Amistad Farm Labor Housing development in the Panhandle community of Hereford, Texas is a national model for successful farm worker housing. The project was jointly funded by the US Department of Agriculture and the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs.

- 3) Provide an adequate supply of quality, affordable housing through both the for profit and nonprofit sectors with assistance from state and federal rent supplement and construction subsidies.

As the home of the second-largest farm worker population in the country, Texas should be a leader in ensuring that farm workers have a decent place to live.

www.texashousing.org



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Preview an upcoming report documenting
the deplorable living conditions of
farm workers in the Texas Panhandle.