



Looking for leadership

Following the departure of Father James Connolly, the Catholic Charismatic Renewal within the Diocese of Rochester has restructured its leadership and refocused its emphasis. Page 4.



Making a change

By seeking small ways to live more peacefully with one another, parishioners of St. Bridget's Church in East Bloomfield hope to have a collective impact on their community. Page 16.

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Drought, fear pose potential crisis for local farmworkers

By Lee Strong

Last month, as Innocencio Gererro and two other migrant workers drove from farm to farm in search of work, their car was hit by a loaded dump truck that failed to stop at a stop sign. His two companions were injured in the crash, and Gererro died. He was an indirect victim of this summer's drought and a growing employment crisis among local farmworkers.

The crisis is producing less dramatic victims, as well. Thirty-four people — several times the usual number — were forced to seek food early last week from the food cupboard at Brockport's Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish. Most of these people were migrant workers, desperate for food.

Other farmworkers are facing eviction because they can't earn enough to pay their rent. A number of families that have found jobs are living day-to-day existences. Unable to save money because the work is not as steady as it has been in previous years, they face a potentially long winter when they return to their homes to the south.

Poor crops caused by the drought and a cold, wet spring, combined with a glut of workers flooding New York from other states, and the possible importation of farmworkers from China and Korea have created the potential for a crisis among farmworkers this year, according to farmworker advocates.

"There's not such a tremendous (labor) surplus at this point that people are sitting around and starving, but there is the potential for a problem later," said Matthew Gallelli of the Brockport Migrant Education Project. "It may well become a crisis in the fall when the apple picking starts, because the apple crop has been significantly damaged."

Signs of the growing problem are already evident, observed Marie Mosher, who directs Nativity's food cupboard. "I've had more and more workers coming for food in the last three weeks," she said. "I didn't understand it at first, so I started to ask questions."

What Mosher discovered is that the living situations of farmworkers are growing more desperate. Workers and their families are going for days with little or no food, and because they can't pay their rent, families are being threatened with eviction.

Although these workers face tougher times ahead, even greater difficulty confronts workers just arriving for contract work, Gallelli noted. These contract workers are not being hired, or are only able to work a day or two at a time. They are subsequently forced to drive from farm to farm searching for jobs.

Thus far, only a small number of unemployed workers are affected by this pattern locally, but in Ohio many farmworkers are unemployed, according to Stuart Mitchell, director of Rural Opportunities, Inc., a non-profit group that aids farmworkers and the ru-

ral poor in the Rochester area.

The Rural Opportunities offices in Ohio have already exhausted their resources trying to help farmworkers there, Mitchell said, predicting that his own office will begin to see a comparable flood in the coming months.

Workers who can't find work or enough work face an additional problem. Many of those who have applied for the amnesty under the Immigration and Control Act of 1986 are afraid to apply for public assistance of any kind because the program requires them to show that they will not be a financial burden on U.S. society.

"People are afraid they will jeopardize their chances of legalization," said David Nojaim, immigration legalization coordinator for Rural Opportunities. "One person just had a baby and wanted to apply for Medicaid for his wife and children, but he was afraid it would affect his status." The man eventually applied for benefits for the child only, Nojaim said.

He added that even many workers who would not face difficulties if they received public assistance are afraid to apply because of what they've heard. "There's even confusion (about the regulations) in some of the local welfare offices," Nojaim noted.

Winston Barrus, assistant district director of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization office in Buffalo, acknowledged that under the 1986 act, individuals who apply for amnesty may not be public charges or give evidence that they will become public charges. He added, however, that in light of the current agricultural situation, a worker who accepts assistance for a short-term need won't necessarily be denied amnesty.

"The amnesty laws were designed to be humanitarian," Barrus said. "We'd look at each situation on a case-by-case basis. We certainly wouldn't want to deny someone a meal or a roof over their head. The concern is that they will not be a burden in the future, and I'm not convinced that a short-term acceptance of assistance will cause someone to be denied amnesty."

Even when the workers overcome fears about jeopardizing their amnesty status and seek public assistance, they can encounter additional obstacles. Tammy Klaproth, a social worker at the Albion office of Oak Orchard Community Health Center, noted that the Orleans County social-service office has no Spanish-speaking employees, forcing Hispanic workers to bring their own translators.

If they do break through the language barriers, Klaproth continued, the workers also have to supply such documentation as birth certificates and social security numbers for all their children. In many cases, these documents have been lost or were never obtained.

Frequently, workers become discouraged by the many obstacles and don't return to the office, Klaproth said. Some workers, aware of problems others have encountered, don't even bother to try, she observed.

And, advocates warn, migrants may soon be confronted by competition from workers imported from China and Korea, who would be allowed to work in this country under a yet another provision of the 1986 immigration act. Government officials explain, however, that such workers will only be allowed in after certain conditions are met.

According to John Castellani of the U.S. Department of Labor office in New York City, a farmer must first file a job order with his local employment service office. If that office has no workers available, it will then contact other local offices. If the local offices are unable to supply farmworkers, then offices in such traditional farm supply states as Texas, Florida, North and South Carolina and Puerto Rico will be asked to send workers. If all of these steps fail to produce enough workers, the



Farmer William Beck looks over his ruined crop in Eightyfour, Pa., near Pittsburgh. Continuing drought conditions throughout much of the nation's farm country are confronting seasonal workers as well as farmers with devastating prospects.

government will then allow workers from other nations to be brought into the country, Castellani said.

But Wally Ruehle, managing attorney for Farmworker Legal Services of New York, said the system doesn't always work as stipulated by the labor department. When advocacy groups in other parts of the country have questioned the use of foreign workers, the employment services in the supply states could produce no records of having been contacted to supply domestic workers, he claimed.

"I don't know whether the orders got lost in the bureaucracy or weren't sent, but they are not there," Ruehle said.

He speculated that farmers might be inclined to use the foreign laborer program because the 1986 act requires employers to check the documentation of all workers they hire. Many farmers, Ruehle said, may decide to avoid the extra paper work by applying for the foreign workers — whose papers have already been checked by the government.

Stuart Mitchell believes that the farmers have other motives.

"This is another way of developing another source of labor, and this puts the domestic workers more at the mercy of the employers," he said. If foreign workers complain about conditions on the farms, Mitchell said, they can be fired and immediately be deported to their home countries.

Castellani acknowledged that if a worker is fired, he would be deported, but noted that the law entitles the worker to appeal if he believes he was unjustly fired.

Legal counsel for such an appeal would be provided locally through Farmworker Legal Services. But according to Ruehle, that fired foreign worker would probably not have time to make such appeal.

"Practically speaking, unless we happen to be in the camp the night that it takes place, the worker will be on a plane back to China, Korea or wherever before he has a chance to apply," he said. Because of limited staff, the service is only able to visit 25 to 30 percent of the more than 300 camps it services in western New York.

The coming months will likely be even harder for farmworkers and their families, yet advocates note, many workers are unaware of what the future holds for them.

"They don't know what's going on," observed Eric Rivera, a nutrition specialist with Farmworker Legal Services. "We realize how the immigration laws affect them. We realize how the importation of Chinese workers will affect the job situation."

"They only see the immediate, not the long-term," he concluded. "So many of them are concerned right now with just making ends meet."

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