

# CONTINUED...

## Workers

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Wilkins pointed out that the diocese's estimated 6,500 migrant farmworkers do the work the most citizens won't do — including citizens who are poor. He cited surveys that indicated only 12 percent of the state's current welfare recipients, for example, would be willing to harvest fruit and vegetables for a living.

"They don't take away jobs," he said. "They do jobs."

Ironically, Wilkins noted, migrants may be working at jobs most citizens don't want, but they receive few of the labor-law protections most citizens take for granted. For example, migrants are not protected by New York's collective bargaining laws, he said, and receive no overtime pay. Meanwhile, many of the state's health and safety laws that cover business and industry are not applicable to the state's farms under current state law.

Wilkins spends a portion of his time working with parishes and agencies in the Finger Lakes region on behalf of migrant farmworkers who often need help obtaining warm clothes, food, med-



Everett Hobart (left) said he is trying to let migrant workers know that the Catholic Church is willing to reach out to them.

ical assistance and, occasionally, advice on how to deal with the law.

Not all farmworkers suffer unjust labor conditions, or inhumane bosses. Indeed, a number of Catholic migrant ministry workers told the *Catholic Courier* that

some farm owners they regularly dealt with were exemplary in their treatment of their workers, and that many farmers were more than happy to cooperate with ministry volunteers in their visits to the camps.

On the other hand, Father Robert Kreckel, pastor of St. Mary's of the Lake Parish in Ontario, noted that even if there were problems, the vast majority of migrant farmworkers would be unwilling to tell even a trusted church worker about them.

"They don't want to complain to us because they don't want to lose their jobs," he said.

At the end of the day, the condition of migrant farmworkers — whether they are well-treated or not — directly challenges the diocesan church to live up to Christ's command to value those persons often overlooked by society, according to Wilkins.

"These are the people who have nobody," Wilkins said. "If we are to remain who we are, then we have to speak out strongly on behalf of the immigrants."

In particular, Wilkins explained, the rights and lives of migrant farmworkers must become a church priority as the nation reconsiders its commitment to both federally funded social welfare programs and to the concerns of immigrants.

"My sense is as the federal devolution of responsibility continues to the states ... immigrants and farmworkers and non-citizens are going to have to suffer an even lower priority level than they have in the past," he said.

The diocese has made efforts on behalf of migrant farmworkers, especially since the 1970s, according to the Regional Hispanic Pastoral Ministry Plan published this year by the diocese's Regional Hispanic Ministry Group.

The plan listed the counties of Wayne, Yates and Ontario as focal points of diocesan farmworker ministry. The diocese also operates a joint migrant ministry with the Diocese of Buffalo operating in western Monroe County, and Orleans and Genesee counties.

Diocesan migrant ministry workers generally provide such services as Spanish Masses and various social events for farmworkers, along with catechism classes and sacramental preparation.

In Brockport in western Monroe County, for example, Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish holds a welcoming Mass in Spanish and dinner dance for area migrants each spring, according to Sister Mary Jane Mitchell, SSJ, director of Hispanic Migrant Ministry, a joint effort of the Rochester and Buffalo dioceses.

Meanwhile, a migrant farmworker faith community called "The Community of Our Lady of Guadalupe" has formed at Church of the Epiphany in Sodus, according to Father Kreckel. About 180 farmworkers, including 10 to 12 women, participate in the Guadalupe community, Father Kreckel said.

And in Penn Yan, St. Michael's and St. Andrew's parishes held a "despidida," or farewell Mass, for migrant farmworkers on Oct. 22 to conclude a ministry program lasting from Easter through the growing season.

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NEXT WEEK: An examination of the diocese's pastoral work with migrants, and proposals for expanding it.

NOV. 23: A look at the diocese's advocacy work for migrants, and on the New York bishops' recent decision to make farmworkers' rights a legislative lobbying priority in 1996.

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