



KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

Education needed to understand pesticide exposure among farmworkers

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Each year, more than 45,000 migrant and seasonal farmworkers work in Michigan. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, farmworkers suffer the highest rate of chemical-related illness of any occupational group.

In a series of focus groups conducted by the Washington state Department of Health, nearly 75 percent of farmworkers reported experiencing acute symptoms of pesticide exposure. In a 2002 survey in Colorado, 49 percent of the surveyed farmworkers indicated they had experienced symptoms of pesticide exposure, such as skin irritation, headaches or inflamed eyes.

According to the Michigan Department of Community Health, there were only 14 cases of farmworker pesticide exposures in 2006. Twelve of the farmworkers were exposed in the same event, meaning there were only three reported incidents statewide in 2006.

Why is this number so small? What can we do about it? In order to answer these questions, we have to look at factors that discourage farmworkers from reporting pesticide exposure as well as obstacles that arise after reports are actually made.

If a farmworker makes a complaint, he runs the risk of being labeled a troublemaker or a bad worker. Fear that this distinction could put his job in jeopardy might prevent him from reporting that he is experiencing pesticide-related symptoms. This is especially true for H2A guest workers, whose existence in the United States depends entirely on being able to work. For non-citizens, there is the additional fear of being deported. Combined, these factors contribute heavily to underreporting. "Sometimes (farmworkers) don't have a choice," said Adam Jeffries, an attorney with Farmworker Legal Services. "They have to work to survive."

Aside from fear, farmworkers' lack of access to adequate information about pesticides can contribute to underreporting. The Worker Protection Standard requires growers to provide farmworkers with pesticide training safety; additionally, growers must notify farmworkers when pesticides are applied.

Still, many growers fail to comply with these standards. According to Antonio Castro-Escobar, agricultural worker protection manager with the Michigan Department of Agriculture, the reason that some growers do not comply is that they think that the only person who is affected by pesticides is the person who applies them. Growers will say, "I did not know of the law," or "I wasn't aware that I had to do this," explained Castro-Escobar. Castro-Escobar is the only Spanish/English speaking inspector in the state, which makes it difficult to follow up with farmworkers and thereby enforce the Worker Protection Standard among growers.

Another barrier to reporting is insufficient awareness among many nurses and medical care providers about how to diagnose, treat, and report cases of pesticide exposure. Farmworkers who go to the emergency room and present common symptoms of pesticide exposure, such as rashes, headaches, or nausea, may not receive the attention they need because of misdiagnosis. According to Judy Fitzgerald, of InterCare Community Health Network, many nurses and health care providers do not receive pesticide-specific information in their professional training, so they need additional support when they start working in hospitals or clinics in areas with high concentrations of farmworkers. Fitzgerald said that in order to make this happen, "the health care community has to have a commitment to cooperate with the surveillance

efforts, along with good clinical management of pesticide exposure."

In order to reduce pesticide exposure in the state of Michigan, it will be necessary to address all of these issues as part of a larger, coordinated effort.

"If there were one group only, I think a lot of misunderstanding and miscommunication would be eliminated," Castro-Escobar said. "It would make it less complex for growers and for all of us to interact."

For Jeffries, the most critical piece of this effort is outreach to farmworkers, with the goal of increasing reporting. "I think that if there was a spike in the number of farmworkers reporting, that would be one way to jumpstart the process," he said.

According to Fitzgerald, promotion programs have the potential to accomplish this goal, but more funding will be required in order to implement them. It is crucial that this funding be secured and that awareness and reporting of pesticide exposure increases.

"We don't want there to be some horrible tragedy where a large number of workers die because of a terrible accident that happened because of exposure," Fitzgerald said. "We also don't want to find out years down the road that chemicals in pesticides today can wreak havoc not only on the farmworkers, but also on their children's lives."

Rachel Udow and Marlene Chavez are the project

coordinators for Farmworkers Legal Services and have been working on a Pesticide Action Project for the last year to

increase awareness of how

pesticides affect agriculture workers in Michigan.

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