

San Francisco Chronicle

THE VOICE OF THE WEST

EDITORIALS

Still a Harvest of Shame

FORTY YEARS ago, Edward R. Murrow shocked the nation with a CBS News documentary that exposed the grinding poverty and rampant disease that afflicted our country's farmworkers.

Sadly, the plight of farmworkers still cries out for greater public attention. "Those who harvest California's bountiful fruits and vegetables are still the poorest people in the state," says Don Villarejo, who, as former director of the California Institute for Rural Studies, canvassed seven farming communities in order to study the health of farmworkers.

Funded by the California Health Endowment, the survey found an astonishingly high risk of heart disease, stroke, hypertension, diabetes and obesity among the young men who labor in California's agricultural fields.

To those who work with migrant workers, such health risks are not surprising. Cynthia Belon, who oversees programs for the homeless in Contra Costa County, says that "when mobile health vans arrive at a homeless encampment of migrant farm families, many people flee, afraid of being deported. Living under bridges, piled into cars, or packed into shelters, farmworkers mistakenly fear that health workers will charge them with child neglect and take away their kids. It takes a long time for us to gain their trust so that we can treat them."

As transient workers, farm laborers have had little access to health care. The study found that 70 percent of the workers had no health insurance, a third had never seen a doctor and half had never been to a dentist.

Many are eligible for Medi-Cal or the Healthy Families medical coverage for their children, but only 7 percent take advantage of any of these state medical programs. The reasons are not hard to fathom. Filling out eligibility forms is a daunting task, especially for those with little or no command of English. As transients, moreover, farmworkers

must sign up for Medi-Cal benefits every single time they move to a new county. And many just can't afford Medi-Cal's co-payments. Most of the interviewed 971 workers were young, married, uneducated Latino men who were living on annual wages of \$7,500 to \$10,000.

As a result, farmworkers suffer from chronic diseases and rotting teeth. By the time they enter an emergency room, they often face a life-threatening situation. By the time they see a dentist, their teeth are too weakened to save.

Poor nutrition, say health workers, is one reason for the high degree of iron-deficiency found among young male workers. With no place to cook, parents and children scavenge through garbage cans, or eat whatever fast-food they can afford.

As a result of the study, the California Endowment has now asked former Rep. Esteban Torres to bring together a dozen policy-makers to address the health problems of farmworkers.

There is much that they can and should do. Workers and their employers need to contribute to medical insurance coverage. The public sector must operate clinics in the evenings and during weekends, when farmworkers are available. And these clinics should be culturally sensitive so that farmworkers won't avoid them. Medi-Cal should be changed so that farmworkers can carry medical benefits from one county to another. Finally, foundations and philanthropists, which mostly fund services along the coastal areas of the state, need to re-focus on the desperate needs of those who toil in the interior farming regions.

What this study has exposed is a disgrace. In the midst of agricultural abundance, our farmworkers suffer hunger. In the midst of a booming state economy, they are homeless and unhealthy.

The harvest of shame has not yet ended.



MARGARET SCOTT / Special to The Chronicle