**SOCIAL IMPACT PRACTICUM PROJECT PROPOSAL**

**Texas RioGrande Legal Aid Association (TRLA)**

**THE SOCIAL IMPACT PRACTICUM (SIP)**

Data science project involving nationwide data that TRLA has scraped and collected on H-2A and H-2B job postings to help farmworker advocates monitor postings and conduct worker outreach. The project will involve: (1) scraping and linkages with other external data sources, such as Department of Labor (DOL) enforcement records of employers who have violated worker rights, (2) a report summarizing key trends, and (3) potentially building a interactive visualization tool of those trends to supplement the searchable database.

**YOUR PROJECT PARTNER**

Your project partner is the Analytics and Research division of the Texas RioGrande Legal Aid Association. TRLA’s mission is to provide “free civil legal services to residents in 68 Southwest Texas counties” and the organization “represents migrant and seasonal farm workers throughout the state and in six other southern states”

* The website is: https://www.trla.org/
* Your liaison is Elizabeth Shackney, the Director of Analytics and Research at TRLA

**SOCIAL IMPACT PRACTICUM CONTEXT**

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) administers the H-2A visa program, which issued over 200,000 visas in FY2019 and allows agricultural employers to hire foreign guest workers on temporary visas. Employers need to certify that they are facing a shortage of U.S. workers and that they are upholding health and safety conditions. The H-2B visa program has similar aims for seasonal, non-agricultural employers, but is capped at 66,000 visas annually, limiting its scope relative to H-2A.

While the programs provide important employment opportunities for low-wage workers, especially in places with aging rural workforces, visa workers can be especially vulnerable to violations of their legal rights. While each employer signs a contract with DOL promising to abide by worker protection laws, investigations show that employees can still face issues such as wage theft (a failure to receive legally or contractually-promised wages), unsafe conditions in employer-provided housing sites, and other issues. While federal and state agencies conduct inspections of employment and housing sites, cuts to enforcement budgets have weakened oversight mechanisms.

Within this context, TRLA, responding to requests from farmworker advocates, has created the most comprehensive database to date of H-2A and H-2B job postings, creating a searchable database for migrant farmworker advocates to track job postings and plan outreach: [https://trla.shinyapps.io/H2Data/.](https://trla.shinyapps.io/H2Data/) The database is comprised of a mix of (1) data scraped from individual state websites, and (2) quarterly DOL data releases. The present project will build upon that initial work through linkages between the data and (1) enforcement data and (2) contextual data on the areas surrounding the job sites. Questions might include:

* DOL enforcement data shows which employers face sanctions without a program ban or temporary program bans. What is the frequency with which employers continue to post jobs after they have been sanctioned? How rapidly do temporarily-banned employers return to posting after their ban expires? Can we use external sources to mitigate problems of small employers changing their names to evade detection?
* The visas are meant to fill workforce gaps in the surrounding regions, but some allege that employers turn to the program less due to verified workforce shortages and more due to financial incentives in terms of lower federal tax rates for temporary workers. Can we use American Community Survey (ACS) and other public datasets to understand patterns of employer opt into the programs?

**ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT**

TRLA offers free civil legal services to residents in 68 Southwest Texas counties (<https://www.trla.org/offices>). The farmworker law practice within their broader labor and employment practice group represents farmworkers with employment problems not only in the Texas but also in six other states through a Tennessee branch office (Kentucky, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, Tennessee): <https://www.trla.org/labor-employment>. In addition to that practice area, which is the area most connected with the SIP project, they also provide free legal services to low-income people facing issues like eviction, bankruptcies and foreclosures, divorces and custody arrangements, consumer fraud, wills and estates, accessing public benefits, and litigating for civil and environmental rights.

*Organizational information above courtesy of the organization's website.*