



Standing for dignity in the workplace

Testimony in Support of HB 3555
March 29, 2023

Dear Chair Dexter, Vice-Chair Gamba, Vice-Chair Helfrich, and Members of the House Committee on Housing and Homelessness,

Thank you for the opportunity to give testimony on this important bill. My name is Kate Suisman. I am an attorney at the Northwest Workers' Justice Project (NWJP). We represent workers in low-wage jobs when bad things happen to them at work, like when they are not paid or are discriminated against for being in a protected class or are retaliated against for speaking up. Finally, we engage in policy advocacy and try to bring the important perspectives of workers in low-wage jobs and immigrant workers to these policy discussions.

We strongly encourage you to pass HB 3555 as a critical housing security strategy to protect farmworkers and their families across the state from unsafe, overcrowded, and unsanitary housing conditions.

Many of the clients NWJP represents are farmworkers who live in substandard, employer-provided housing. These workers, who may also be in vulnerable immigration situations, are at risk of losing their employer-provided housing as well as their jobs if they speak up about the poor quality of their living conditions. Community-based housing alternatives that are not tied to specific employers, such as those proposed by HB 3555, would ensure that employers cannot use housing to threaten workers into remaining silent about exploitative conditions. It would also ensure housing is built near agricultural sites so farmworkers can live near their jobs, and help ease the labor shortage which is especially severe in agriculture.

Everyone deserves a safe and decent place to call home. Farmworkers and their families are essential to the fabric of Oregon, not only by putting food on our tables but also by contributing to the vibrancy of our state. In Oregon, there are an estimated 174,00 migrant and seasonal farmworkers, including their families.¹ They contribute their critical skills to Oregon's \$5 billion agricultural production.²

¹ <https://www.oregon.gov/oha/HPA/HP-PCO/Documents/2018%20Updates%20to%20MSFW%20Enumeration%20Studies%20Report.pdf>
² <https://www.oregon.gov/oda/shared/Documents/Publications/Administration/BoardReport.pdf>

Farmworkers earn an estimated \$29,630 in annual wages.³ These low wages are compounded by other challenges. Due to Oregon's critical housing shortage and cost of living crisis compounded with cultural and linguistic barriers, many farmworkers and their families face housing instability or inadequate housing conditions, leading to living in poor and overcrowded conditions.

Farmworkers—who are often immigrants, Indigenous and/or Latinx, and low-income—need safe, affordable places to call home.

HB 3555-1 increases farmworkers' ability to care for themselves and their families by making targeted investments towards the development and pre-development of community-based housing for farmworkers across our state, including in rural and urban environments.

The urgent need for a bill like HB 3555 cannot be understated. NWJP has been participating on rulemaking committees to strengthen the Oregon OSHA protections for agricultural labor housing over the past 5 years. However, Oregon still does not have modernized protections to ensure decent quality farmworker housing. Farmworkers and their families are the backbone of Oregon communities. HB 3555 is a step in the right direction for ensuring safe living conditions for all. Please support Oregon's farmworkers and advance the housing security strategies through HB 3555.

Thank you very much.

³ <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/farming-fishing-and-forestry/agricultural-workers.htm#tab-5>