Latino Dairy Workers' Mental Health Under Attack

A sweeping survey of the Vermont dairy industry exposes isolation, fear and occupational hazards faced by Latinos.

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When Julia Doucet, an outreach nurse at the Open Door Clinic in Middlebury, Vermont, received a visit from Jesús, a migrant worker on a dairy farm in Addison County, he was suffering from physical symptoms brought on by severe mental stress. Like many other Latinos working in the dairy industry, Jesús had an exhaustive list of worries that originated in his birth country. Indeed, once settled in America, many migrant workers are overwhelmed by stress caused by PTSD arising from their journey to the United States as well as poverty, isolation and language barriers, all of which are exacerbated by the generally poor living and working conditions they experience, reports VTDigger.org, a publication of the Vermont Journalism Trust.

Doucet later discovered that Jesús was being extorted by men who had kidnapped his daughter in Mexico and were threatening to kill her unless he sent them more money, which he didn't have.

As a health provider to many other dairy workers, Doucet treats individuals dealing with physical and mental health issues triggered by similar situations. In Vermont, the dairy industry poses significant stress-related challenges for Latino workers, report recent findings published in the Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health.

Help for these workers is scarce in this state, Doucet observed. "Even if you're the most resilient person, you already have a lot of strikes against you, just based on what you have to do to get here and be here, and survive here, and even to thrive here," she told VTDigger.org.

To determine the extent of the stress these workers face, a research team from the University of Vermont (UVM) in Burlington surveyed 173 participants using the Migrant Farmworker Stress Inventory, a questionnaire designed by farmworker leaders associated with the organization Migrant Justice.

Results showed that anxiety about immigration—including border crossing problems and deportation fears—topped the list of stressors the workers experienced. In addition, they identified isolation, language barriers, undependable methods of transportation, a host of occupational hazards, low wages, unfair working conditions and inadequate housing among their other

concerns.

“In my view it’s not farmers versus farmworkers,” said Daniel Baker, PhD, an associate professor at UVM and the lead author of the study. “It’s one single system that works better when there’s better communication and understanding and everyone is working toward a healthier and safer environment.”

As a result of this inquiry, Baker received a grant to collaborate with Agri-Mark, a dairy farmer cooperative in the Northeast, to improve a safety training program in Vermont for Spanish-speaking farmworkers.

To learn more about Latino workers’ health issues, read “Latinos Working in Food Processing and Agriculture Face Greater COVID-19.”

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