



2022 LATINO COMMUNITY REPORT

Latino H2A Workers and Their Importance for Ohio's Agricultural Industries



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Table of Contents

04

Executive Summary

05

What is the H-2A Program?

07

Who are the Agricultural Guestworkers?

08

In Their Own Words: Why Become an Agricultural Guestworker?

09

Challenges Faced by Agricultural Guestworkers

13

The Voice of Ohio Growers: Value of the H-2A Workers

14

Worker Treatment & Access Issues

15

Looking to the Future: Opportunities and Recommendations

16

Recommendations & Conclusion

17

References



Executive Summary

Agriculture is a \$100 billion industry in Ohio, and it is currently experiencing an unprecedented labor shortage (Sonnenberg, 2022, Cooley, 2022). Farm owners of all kinds- from small tobacco outfits in Highland County to 2,000-acre vegetable operations in Erie County- cannot find enough domestic migrant and seasonal agricultural workers (MSAW) to keep their businesses open from one year to the next. Because of this, increasing numbers of farm operators are looking to the H-2A program, which provides temporary visas to workers from other countries, to meet their labor needs each season. The work is temporary, but the vast majority of the guestworkers return to the same farm year after year. These people are here legally, pay state and federal taxes, and are essential to our agricultural industry. This Latino Community Report provides an overview of who these guestworkers are and how they experience life here in Ohio. Combining the results of a survey of 285 H-2A workers, interviews with stakeholders and H-2A employers, and analysis of Department of Labor data, this report discusses the role these workers play in our agricultural sector and presents recommendations for the program's improvement[1]. H-2A workers are an essential part of Ohio's farm labor and will continue to be a crucial component of our economy. Understanding and meeting their needs is an important step in ensuring a vibrant future for Ohio's farms and nurseries.

[1] Methodology

The information presented here comes from interviews conducted in 2022 with 285 Spanish-speaking male H-2A workers across 40 counties in Ohio. We wanted to understand who these H-2A workers were and to learn more about their lives as Ohio guestworkers. Investigators asked for demographic information and questions about worker's experiences in Ohio. To the investigators' knowledge, it is the largest such survey of H-2A workers in the nation. No names or other identifying information was asked. Investigators conducted the interviews exclusively in Spanish. All interviews were conducted by the principal investigator and report author, or the research assistant. Investigators also interviewed stakeholders, such as migrant farmworker advocates and migrant health clinicians, and growers and farm owners across Ohio who employ H-2A workers (n=27). The growers come from both agriculture and horticulture and their operations range from small (fewer than 10 H-2A workers) to large (more than 60). Some have been participating in the program for decades, while others started as recently as 2021. Finally, Investigators used Department of Labor data to establish and visualize statewide H-2A employment trends over time. All names are pseudonyms. The quotes are presented in the language in which they were recorded, along with an English translation where necessary.



What is the H-2A Program?

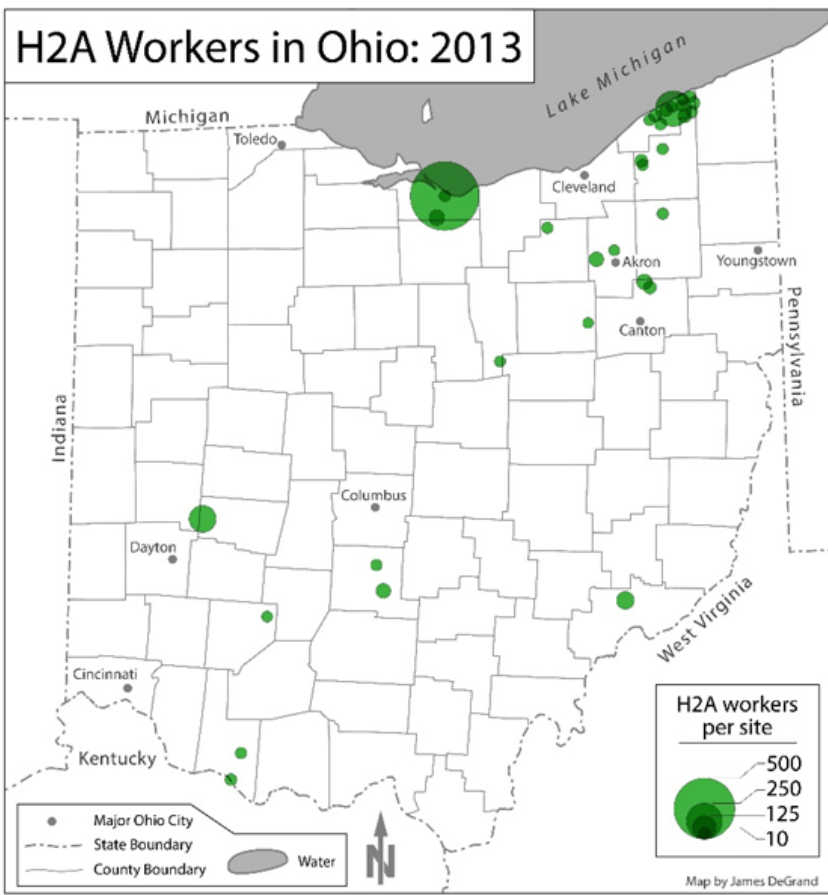
The H-2A Temporary Agricultural Program provides a legal opportunity for foreign-born workers to enter the United States to perform seasonal farm labor on a temporary basis. It requires employers in the U.S. to demonstrate that their efforts to recruit U.S. workers were not successful, and they must pay a state specific minimum wage to those workers. (USDA, 2022). Employers also must provide free housing that passes inspections and pay for their workers' transportation to and from their hometowns. H-2A workers are required to pay both state and federal taxes but are not allowed to claim their children as their dependents. They are allowed to get drivers' licenses and are legally entitled to coverage by workers compensation. Their visa is tied to their specific employer, which means they may not seek work elsewhere while in the United States.

Although they do the same work as other Migrant Seasonal Agricultural Workers, the conditions differ significantly: they are housed differently, paid differently, and remain excluded from the Agricultural Workers Protection Act. They are also not included in the National Agricultural Worker Survey, which means that little is known about them.

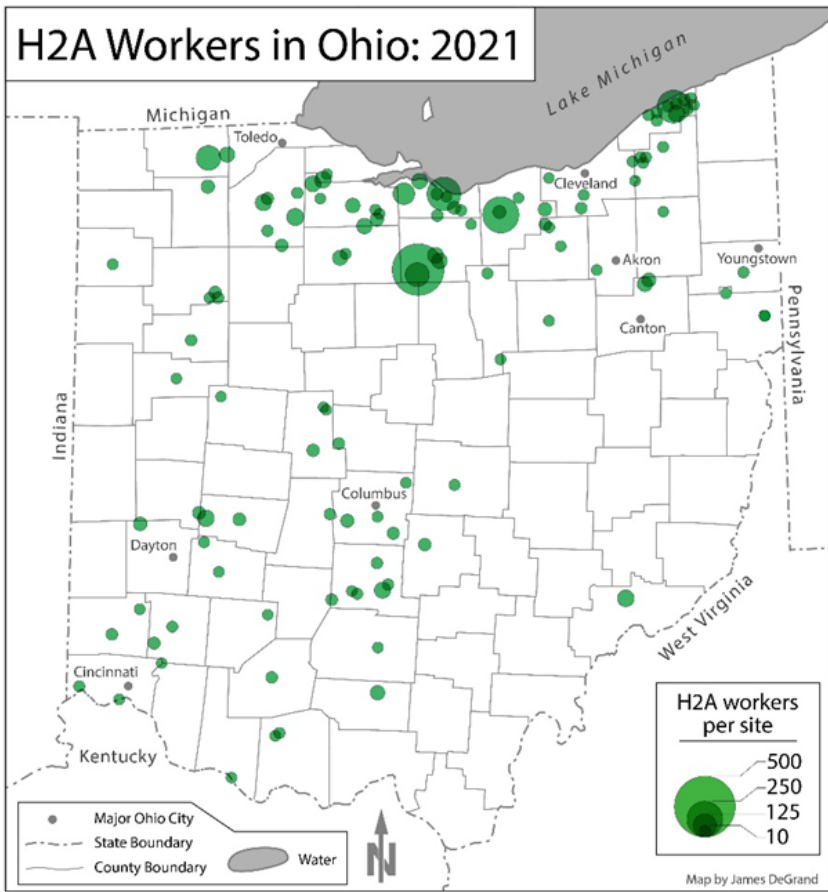
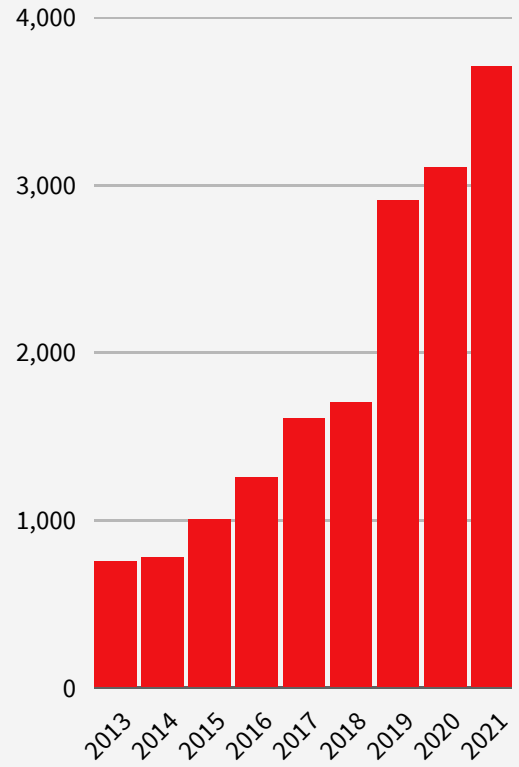
The program has only become widely used in the past decade: nationally, in 2013, 100,000 H-2A visas were issued. In 2021, that number increased to 317,000 (Martin, 2022). Ohio reflects this trend, with 762 visas issued in 2013, and 3,661 reported in 2021- an increase of 300 percent (Department of Labor, 2021).

Who Employs H-2A Workers and Where Are They?

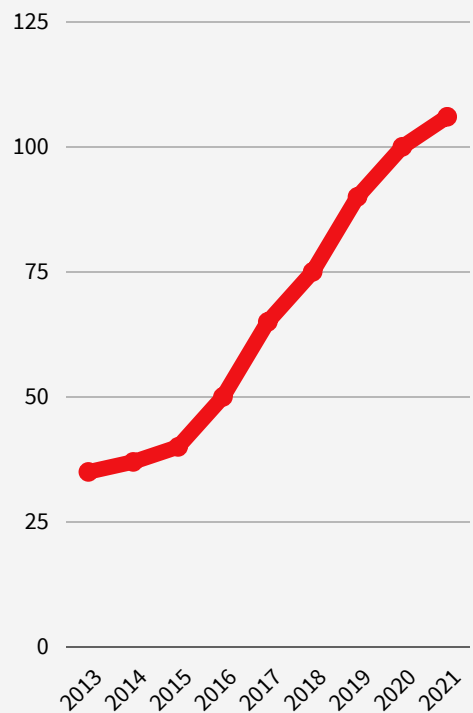
As seen below, use of the H-2A program has spread throughout the state in the past 12 years. In Ohio, the program was first used by nursery owners in the late 1990s. Since then, as the agricultural labor market has contracted, increasing numbers of growers have looked to the visa as their best option for keeping their farms and nurseries open. A wide range of horticultural and agricultural operators now participate in the program, including honey farmers in northwest Ohio, flower farmers in central Ohio and orchard owners in eastern Ohio.



TOTAL NUMBER OF CERTIFIED H-2A WORKERS IN OHIO



TOTAL NUMBER OF CERTIFIED H-2A EMPLOYERS IN OHIO



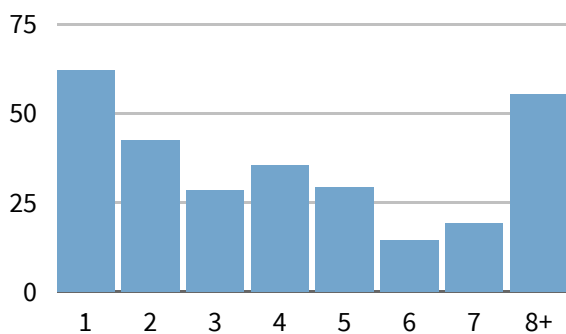


Who are the Agricultural Guestworkers?

Over 90% of H-2A workers are men from Mexico. Within Mexico, they come from a variety of states, but virtually none hail from the border region. The largest population in our survey comes from the central state of Guanajuato, which is located northwest of Mexico's capital. Guanajuato has been providing workers to the US since the early 20th century, when US-based labor contractors used the railroad in the region to recruit and transport laborers to US farms and building projects (Durand, 2001). We also spoke with many men from Chiapas and Oaxaca, which are in southern Mexico and have many indigenous communities. Many other participants came from Hidalgo (also central Mexico) and Veracruz (along the southeastern coast). Other sending countries include Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Jamaica. Most people join the H-2A program through a personal connection and work in crews with friends or family.

The majority of these men have completed at least the 9th grade, and a full 12% report having attended at least one year of university. While most of them have a background in agriculture, their occupational backgrounds vary widely: we met tradesmen, business owners, a school bus driver and even a musician during our interviews. 70% are either married or in a long-term domestic partnership and 74% have at least one child. 15% report having family that live in Ohio permanently.

NUMBER OF YEARS PARTICIPATING
IN H-2A PROGRAM



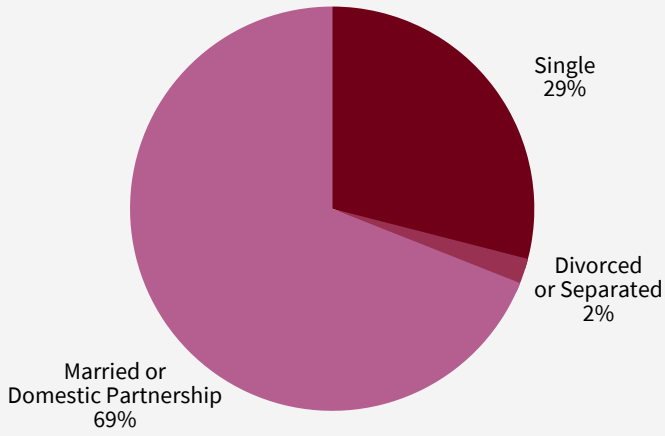
H-2A Work Experience

Forty one percent have been working in the H-2A program for at least 5 years, while 21% are first time visa holders. 77% of those who have been coming for two or more years have always worked at their current farm in Ohio. In some cases, ownership of the business changes, but the workers remain the same. Their contracts range from six weeks to ten months, with the average being six months.

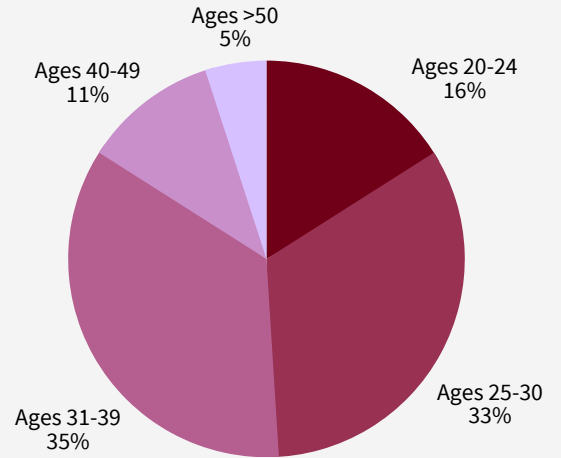


“These men are here on temporary visas, but their presence in Ohio is a predictable and regular feature of the economy and population: they come at the same time each year, and live in the same places, year after year.”

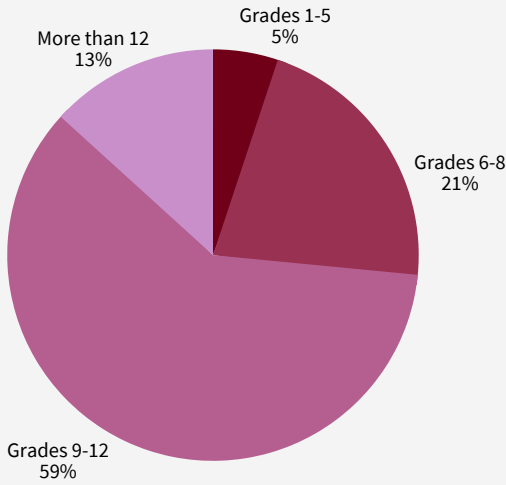
MARITAL STATUS OF H-2A WORKERS IN OHIO (2022)



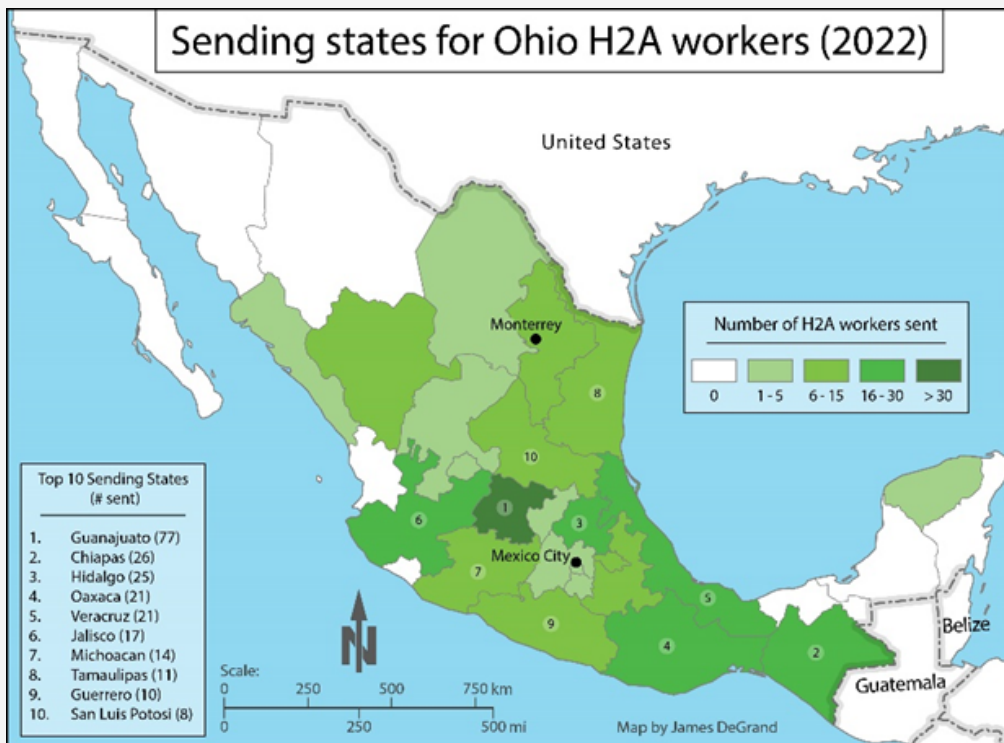
AGES OF H2-A WORKERS IN OHIO (2022)



EDUCATION LEVEL FOR H-2A WORKERS IN OHIO (2022)



Sending states for Ohio H2A workers (2022)



In Their Own Words: Why Become an Agricultural Guestworker?

Agricultural work is a physically demanding and risky occupation: for the sector as a whole, rates of occupational injury and fatality are seven times higher than the national average (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Farm laborers work under all kinds of weather conditions, including rain and extremely high heat, and routinely work 12-16 hour days during the peak season. The tasks entail repetitive movements, often in uncomfortable positions such as stooping, for hours on end, and health risks related to pesticide exposure or occupational injury are high (Arcury and Quandt, 2020).

To better understand how H-2A workers in particular experience agricultural labor, we asked participants in our survey what they liked best about the work, what was hardest about their job, and what surprised them the most in their work here.

An Opportunity to Improve and Learn

When discussing the positive aspects of their work, many noted the pay, and the ability to improve their family's economic situation, but 29% percent also mentioned features of the work itself. While the work is indisputably difficult, being outside in nature and working with plants was something that many genuinely enjoyed. They also see this as a learning opportunity: agriculture and horticulture are different here than in Mexico and Central America, and the workers often reported enjoying learning from the experience, be it new varieties of plants or how to use the machines.

On smaller, family run farms, some men also reported strong and positive relationships with the growers. They felt appreciated by their bosses and trusted them to be honest and fair. Occasionally, people shared ways their bosses go above and beyond to support them in their lives here. Some farm owners, for example, provide English classes for their employees. Another employer gave his workers- who are here on a ten-month contract- the option to take two weeks off during the season so they could return to Mexico and see their family. The thoughtfulness made a difference as many of these men were the least stressed and most able to handle the difficulty of the work and the family separation.

"Sinceramente me gusta todo lo que hago aquí"
"I genuinely like everything I do here"
 PABLO, MICHOACÁN, MEXICO, 22

"La relación con las plantas, conectas con el ambiente"
"[I like] the relationship with the plants, you connect with the environment"
 CESAR, CHIAPAS, 34

"There are tasks I didn't think I could do and now I'm learning them. I'm more capable"
 LUIS, GUANAJUATO, 31

"A poco tiempo notaron mi desempeño y lo recompensaron"
"In a short period of time, they noticed my initiative and rewarded it"
 ARTURO, GUANAJUATO, 34

"I'm surprised how well they treat us. They help us and give us everything we need."
 JAVIER, GUANAJUATO, 25

"Se portan bien con nosotros- son muy atentos. Creía que serían más duros."
"They [the bosses] behave well with us, they're very attentive. I was expecting them to be more difficult."
 OTO, GUANAJUATO, 41

"They thank us for our work and we thank them."
 GASPARD, OAXACA, 24



Challenges Faced by Agricultural Guestworkers

One of the most challenging aspects of the job is being separated from their families. Thirteen percent of our interviewees mentioned this when answering what was most difficult about their work. Reflecting on their absence from home was often one of the heaviest parts of our conversations, as several men reported the difficulty they had missing important family milestones, such as births, graduations, and other celebrations.

“

“In addition to being lonely, these men are also isolated. They live in rural areas, work extremely long hours, do not speak the English language and frequently lack their own means of transportation.”

“When I tell my daughter I'm working to be able to buy her a toy, she says "I don't want anything. I want my dad.”
RAÚL, GUANAJUATO, 34

“Es lo más feo de venir.”
“It's the worst part about coming here.”
NOÉ, GUANAJUATO, 26

“Sometimes it makes you want to cry, you're so alone.”
OSCAR, JALISCO, 33

“Es lo más difícil, estar lejos de los hijos. Me gustaría pedir permiso para volver el año que viene para la graduación de mi hija.”
“Being away from your children is the most difficult part. I'd like to ask permission to go back next year for my daughter's graduation.”
TOMÁS, GUANAJUATO, 33

“Es fuerte en la mente estar separado.”
“Being separated is hard on you mentally.”
ALVARO, GUERRERO, 35

“We talk to them daily. It's emotional, you can really feel the loneliness sometimes.”
BERNARDO, GUATEMALA, 42

“Try not to think about how far you are, [we] talk daily.”
JULIO, GUANAJUATO, 27

“Es difícil porque estamos solos. Se ve fácil pero no.”
“It's difficult because we're alone. It looks easy but it's not.”
MANUEL, VERACRUZ, 42

When asked what they have learned about life in Ohio, many replied “not much because I never go anywhere except the farm and my house”. The small amount of free time they have is spent resting, doing chores, and talking with their families on WhatsApp. Some find other activities, such as playing soccer, volleyball or listening to music, to pass the time and distract themselves from the fact of their separation from their children and wives.

The lack of mobility has a profound impact on the workers’ lives. 84% of the men are unable to go anywhere without their boss giving them a ride- something that is inconvenient for both parties. A good number of these workers expressed interest in getting an Ohio driver’s license- which they are legally allowed to do- so that they could have more autonomy and rely less on their employer for basic needs.

Many long-term participants in the program have managed to get both a license and save up money to buy a car, which in turn allows them to participate more in their host communities, gives them opportunities to see friends and family who are permanently settled in the region, and generally improves their ability to function in the US context.



"If you want to go anywhere you need a car. Mexico is more walkable."

EFRAÍN, OAXACA, 22

"We don't leave very much, don't have much contact outside. We miss Mexico."

OTO, GUANAJUATO, 41

"We haven't learned much because we're just here on the farm."

AURELIO, CHIAPAS, 30

"Vivo normal (me imagino, porque no salimos). Encerrado. My life here is regular (I imagine, because we don't go out). We're stuck here."

BENJAMIN, GUANAJUATO, 35

"It's not like Mexico, its more isolated. There aren't people walking around like there is in Mexico."

CONRADO, PUEBLA, 47

"I haven't learned anything because we are so isolated. I would like to be somewhere where I can be in the community more and have things to do."

CARLOS, NICARAGUA, 31

"You have to learn to be alone. When you're new, you learn that it's not easy here. In Mexico, you think life here is easy and you come and realize it's not easy. It's not how you thought it would be. You see the big cities in movies, but you end up here. You go to work, you come home, you cook, and that's all."

TOMÁS, GUANAJUATO, 32

Despite this loneliness and isolation, the men build community with each other: they play sports together, teach each other how to cook, and those with cars will take their friends out shopping or to see the sights. The support and friendship they offer each other is in fact one of the aspects of the work the men enjoy most. In addition to learning new things and working in nature, the “convivencia,” or companionship, on the farms was one of the things mentioned most frequently during the interviews.

"Like: Bien ambiente con los compañeros, Hard: Entender las personas que no hablan español. "Like: It's a nice working environment with his peers. Hard: understanding people who don't speak Spanish."

HUGO, MICHOACÁN, 30

"Hard: Being far from family. Like: The closeness of the company, meeting people from all over."

DOMINIC, JALISCO, 25

"Disfrutar los amigos/compañeros. Es la segunda familia, el compañerismo "Enjoys friends/peers. It's the second family, [likes] the companionship."

PEDRO, HIDALGO, 37

" Like: work environment, he likes his peers, the pay. Hard: English."

ALFONSO, GUANAJUATO, 36

"Be independent, at first it was hard to learn home chores. Friend here taught him to cook."

ANDRÉS, VERACRUZ, 21



“The last, and perhaps most crucial thing participants mentioned was how their inability to speak English impacted their lives here.”





"The most difficult is to understand them [Americans] and communicate with others."
JORGE, GUANAJUATO, 37

"The most important thing is to know a little bit of English. If you don't know English it's very difficult."
MARCUS, HIDALGO, 24

*"Todo bien- solamente el idioma [that's hard].
"Everything's fine- it's just the language [that's hard]."*
DAVÍD, JALISCO, 32

"I'd like to learn the language so I can communicate."
LUCIO, HIDALGO, 25

"[I'd like] English classes. I've been coming to the US for 10 years and only know a few words."
EUGENIO, JALISCO, 33

Ten percent of the respondents said the language barrier was the hardest thing about their work, and when asked specifically if they would like to take English classes, 88% said yes. The first thing many note upon arrival in the United States for the first time is how vital it is to speak English and how not being able to creates a real deficit in their lives. Some mentioned trying to learn online or through mobile apps such as DuoLingo, and others discussed how they wished they had more opportunities to practice with English-speaking coworkers.

Supervisors often organize crews so that H-2A workers work almost exclusively with each other, something which makes the job easier in the short run but is perceived as a kind of lost opportunity by some in the long term. A few growers have taken it upon themselves to provide English classes for their workers, but these employers are the exception.

"I would like the opportunity to take English classes. Language is a big problem."
JUAN, HIDALGO, 27

"English is so basic you can't do anything without it."
FELIPE, HIDALGO, 31

The Voice of Ohio Growers: Value of the H-2A Workers

When interviewed about their experience with the program, growers had only positive things to say about the workers. Although there are regulations and expenses involved in hiring H-2A labor, growers have found that the workforce is so productive that after the first year, the program essentially pays for itself: profits and productivity increase so much they are able to expand their operations.

Small farm owners also remarked on the meaningful relationships and cross-cultural learning that takes place through hosting and working with people from a foreign country. They appreciate their workers and see them as integral members of their business. As any owner can tell you, workforce development is one of the most challenging parts of running a business.



"It has revolutionized our farm. It has been absolutely amazing; I'm never walking away from that program if I can help it. I've added 50 acres- I never could have considered that other property without the H-2A program."

JOSH, H-2A EMPLOYER SINCE 2020

"This is our second year using the program and I don't know where we would be without the workers we have. Our local workers are just in love with these guys. Our first season we were wondering how they were going to fit in, and we're so blessed. I've been [in the business] for almost 20 years and I've seen a lot of changes in the labor market. This was a leap of faith going into this program and we're already looking to expand it for next year."

JEREMY, H-2A EMPLOYER SINCE 2021

"I don't think we'd be here without the program, It is a lot of work, administratively to navigate the program, there are expenses that come with it. The pros outweigh the cons, the workers are excellent, here to work, they're family oriented and don't cause problems. They're hardworking, ethical people."

ANNE, H-2A EMPLOYER FOR OVER 10 YEARS)

"We've developed friendships and relationships with these people. They are part of our family. [Referring to using recruiting agencies] We don't do "We need 30 guys: you send us somebody and if they don't work out, you send me somebody else". I don't want to do that. It's extended family... the H-2A is just the program we use to protect them and the farm."

JOHN, H-2A EMPLOYER FOR OVER 10 YEARS

"From the beginning we were super grateful to have them and they're really grateful to be here. And so that just sort of built the relationship...we always get really sad this time of year [end of the season] because our friends are going...home. It's sad for us, but they go back to their lives...As soon as they send a picture of them back with their family, you're like, OK, I'm not sad anymore because...they're going home, you know?"

ROSE, H-2A EMPLOYER SINCE 2018



"The strength of the H-2A program is that it provides stability and reliability over time: the men return to the same farm every year, and in doing so develop knowledge and skills that are valuable to the grower. After the first or second year, the group functions as a skilled and efficient unit and no time is lost in training: everyone knows what they need to do and how to do it."

Worker Treatment

National reports on the H-2A program document the wage theft and abuse that H-2A workers commonly experience (CDM, 2020). We also spoke with men who reported poor treatment by their bosses. Some were not allowed to take breaks despite working long hours in extremely hot weather, others were not allowed to leave their residences without their employers' permission. At one camp, an employer told us his company explicitly forbids H-2A workers from filing workers' comp claims and would fire anyone who did so. When we asked what would improve their experience of the program, men shared the following thoughts:

"El trabajo más que nada. Por ejemplo, en el trabajo, cuando es muy duro, le pedimos que nos dé mínimo unos 15 minutos de break, o sea, para tomar un poquito de aire y a veces ya no nos quieren dar. Quizás les urge mucho sacar sus pedidos o quieren que rinde uno más en el trabajo, o lo hacen por desgastarnos."

"The work more than anything. For example, when the work is really hard, we ask them to give us a 15 minute break, just so we can take a breather, and they don't want to give it to us. Maybe they're in a big rush to get their orders finished or they want us to work even harder or they do it just to wear us out."

AURELIO, CHIAPAS, 30

"Que fueran más conscientes con uno. Que nos valora como personas y no nos tratan como burros."

"[I wish] they were more conscientious with us. That they would value us as people and not work us like dogs."

RICARDO, GUANAJUATO, 44

"Since you're here on a visa, you can't complain because you don't want to lose your job so you don't want to say anything against the company."

HERNANDO, GUANAJUATO, 51



Access Issues

Stakeholders and farmworker advocates report that accessing H-2A workers is a significant challenge. Sometimes workers live behind locked gates or on properties with loose dogs, making it difficult to speak with them. In other cases, growers do not permit outreach workers on their property. We also encountered these issues and, on some occasions, the men told us their bosses had expressly forbidden them from speaking to anyone. Others were simply not living at the addresses listed on the H-2A application, which means they have been brought into the state but cannot be located. Because the H-2A program has been used as a cover for human trafficking (see Operation Blooming Onion or the LVH case for examples) these kinds of situations are concerning. Therefore, facilitating access for state agencies and farmworker support organizations is essential for ensuring the program's success.



Looking to the Future: Opportunities and Recommendations

Ohio has a strong network of state agencies and organizations that consider supporting migrant and seasonal agricultural workers to be part of their mission. It is our recommendation that these networks continue to collaborate and improve the work environment and quality of life for Ohio's migrant and seasonal agricultural workers. This network includes the Ohio Migrant Education Center, Justice for Migrant Women, Legal Aid of Western Ohio, the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services, and the Ohio Department of Health, among others. These organizations have decades of experience, knowledge, and human resources that can be brought to bear on this topic.

Stakeholder relationships were further deepened during the 2021 farmworker COVID vaccine campaign. Spearheaded by the Ohio Department of Health, the Ohio Commission on Hispanic/Latino Affairs, and The Ohio State University's Extension Office, it was a significant undertaking that required coordination and logistical support at all levels. Workers, farmers, county health departments and extension agents, local nonprofits, and statewide agencies worked together to offer the vaccine to farmworkers- H-2A and otherwise- across Ohio. Ultimately, it was a success: vaccines were provided at over 85% of all registered migrant farmworker camps. This achievement was reflected in our interviews, during which many workers shared they had received the vaccine the previous summer at their place of work in Ohio.

Ohioans have proved we can build meaningful and effective partnerships across sectors and produce measurable results. We have the capacity to provide effective support for both the growers and the workers who rely on the program for their livelihoods and who we in turn rely on for food. By utilizing a coordinated effort, similar to the COVID-19 pandemic response and vaccine campaign, the following recommendations have the potential to improve the experience for growers and workers alike.



Recommendations

1: Develop programs for H-2A Workers to Learn English

Design and implement a pilot program to offer English classes to the H-2A workers in different parts of the state. This would improve the workers' ability to function during their time here and make it easier for growers to communicate with their workforce. If it is effective, it can be scaled up to cover most or all worksites.

2: Assist H-2A Workers to Obtain Drivers' Licenses

Improve the process by which H-2A workers obtain their drivers licenses. Currently, they are required to renew their license every year when they arrive. Given their isolated locations, the language barriers and their extensive work schedules, renewal is a complicated and difficult procedure. Making the process less onerous—either by changing the requirements or facilitating access—would make this a much more achievable goal and would reflect the true nature of their contracts, which is that they are a tax-paying workforce with stable, long term employment. It relieves the employers of the burden of being the sole means of transportation for their workers, thus increasing the autonomy of all involved.

3: Assist and Educate H-2A Workers to File Taxes

Offer tax clinics to the workers. While they are aware that they must pay taxes, and in some cases compliance is handled by their employers, oftentimes the workers are left to their own devices to meet this requirement. Given that most US citizens do not understand how to correctly file their taxes, expecting foreign nationals to do it is unrealistic. Assisting the workers with this process makes sense, especially since it has the added benefit of improving the state's ability to increase their return on investment in the program.

Conclusion

The H-2A program is an essential source of agricultural labor in our state. While the visa is temporary, the men are stable, reliable, and tax paying participants in Ohio's economy. Furthermore, as more growers turn to the visa program for labor, Ohio will host an increasing number of these workers. Supporting both the farmers and the workers who participate in this program is an important step in ensuring Ohio's agricultural prosperity in the 21st century.

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