

# new york minute

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## Housing for New York's Farmworkers\*

By Mary Jo Dudley and Emily Hamilton \*\*

### What is the Issue?

Housing conditions for New York's farmworkers vary significantly across the state, but much evidence points to the need for improvement. While the state's housing policies remained relatively constant over the past decade, providing housing to farmworkers became more challenging for farm owners and non-profit organizations due to changes in farmworker demographics and funding obstacles. Farmworkers play a critical supporting role to New York State agriculture and NYS farm owners must provide quality affordable housing in order to maintain a reliable work force.

### Changing Demographics

The demographic characteristics of NYS farmworkers changed significantly over the past decade, with increases in the number of farmworkers who live in NYS year-round as well as increases in the number of undocumented immigrants. While it is difficult to determine the exact number, it is estimated that up to 75 percent of all farmworkers in the state are undocumented. A large majority of the farmworkers in NYS are Mexican immigrants who work seasonally on fruit and vegetable farms and year round on dairy farms. These farmworkers tend to stay in NYS rather than migrate to other states or return to their home country, piecing together small jobs on the same or nearby farms. The available data indicates that many farmworkers in New York earn incomes below the poverty line.

### Issues to address

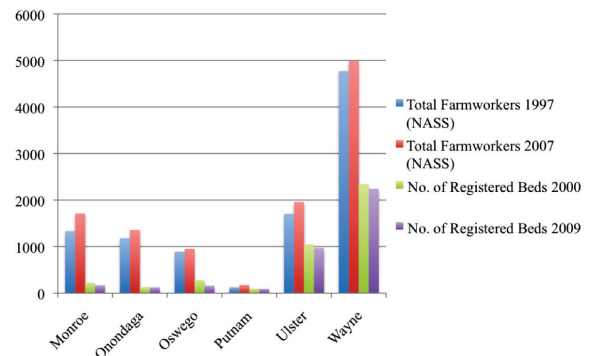
Several issues need to be addressed with regard to providing quality and affordable seasonal and year-round housing for farmworkers. The limited availability of such housing in rural areas combined with the increasing prevalence of year-round farmworkers with low annual incomes underscores the growing need. Because of the winter weather in NYS, it is important that year-round farmworker housing be properly insulated and heat efficient. Much of the current supply of farmworker housing is overcrowded and/or structurally unsound. Data from the USDA Census of Agriculture and the NYS Department of Health shows that although the numbers of farmworkers increased in some NYS counties between 1997 and 2007, the number of registered beds (those inspected by the Health Department) did not increase.

### Obstacles to Providing Farmworker Housing

NYS farm owners face obstacles when seeking funding to construct or improve existing farmworker housing. For example, because such a significant number of NYS farm workers lack documentation, farmers cannot obtain funds from the USDA's Farm Labor Housing Loan program which is only available to farm owners employing farmworkers who are citizens and/or legally admitted permanent residents. The NYS Housing and Community Renewal's Farmworker Housing Program is only for farm owners who have the financial capacity to repay the loan and does not provide enough money to build new housing. There are only a few entitlement counties in NYS with large enough groups of farmworkers to have access to Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) and HOME funds. Rural counties can apply for non-entitlement CDBG funding, but the process is very competitive.

In addition to insufficient public funding, other impediments exist. Because immigration enforcement has increased, many farmworkers avoid interacting with unknown service providers and/or government agency representatives who might offer assistance in obtaining better housing. The limited incomes of migrant and seasonal farmworkers make it difficult for non-profits to charge an affordable rent without significant public subsidies. In addition, many farmworkers do not meet the credit criteria non-profit or-

**Figure 1: Increases in Farmworker Population in Six Counties from 1997-2007 and the Decrease in the Number of Registered Beds from 2000-2009**



Sources: Total Farmworkers, USDA Agricultural Census National Agriculture Statistics Survey, 1997 and 2007. Number of Registered Beds, Nancy M. Port, Principal Sanitarian, New York Department of Health, Bureau of Community Environmental Health and Food Protection (2009)

ganizations use to determine eligibility for low-income housing. And, residents in rural areas often express concerns about land value reductions or having farmworkers as neighbors.

### Policy Recommendations

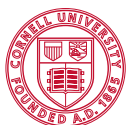
Serious reconsideration of farmworker housing policies is needed. Among the recommendations we put forth are:

- Reconsider the eligibility guidelines for USDA farmworker housing funds.
- Encourage farm owners to work collaboratively to provide housing.
- Set aside funds from the NY Housing Trust Fund for farmworker housing.
- Hold year round farmworker housing to the same inspection code standards as all other housing.
- Grant farmworkers "special needs" status and add them to the NYS Consolidated Plan.
- Provide state tax credits for building or improving farmworker housing.
- Expand the Housing and Community Renewal (HCR) Manufactured Home Replacement Program to include farmworker housing.
- Create an office within HCR dedicated to farmworker housing.

Farmworkers play a critical supporting role to NYS agriculture. The lack of affordable and quality housing for farmworkers limits the ability of farm owners and operators to maintain a stable and reliable work force. Communities and non-profit developers can play an important role in building community support for addressing the housing needs of farmworkers in NYS. In response to this issue, the Cornell Farmworker Program and Pathstone, in collaboration with NYS growers, are working to develop an on-farm labor housing program.

\*For further information, please see the full report entitled Farmworker Housing in New York State: Obstacles and Options 2010, available at: <http://devsoc.cals.cornell.edu/cals/devsoc/outreach/cfp/upload/Farmworker-Housing-Policy-Brief-Jan-2011.pdf>

\*\*Mary Jo Dudley is the Director of the Cornell Farmworker Program (CFP), a recent addition to CaRDI. Emily Hamilton was a CFP intern, and is now the Farmworker Housing Developer at PathStone Corporation, [www.pathstone.org](http://www.pathstone.org)



Cornell University