

NEWS FROM THE PORTLAND AREA AND THE NORTHWEST

Taking health care to migrants in the field



OLIVIA BUCKS/THE OREGONIAN

Cruz Leticia Flores Barillas, with the Health Worker Outreach Project, interviews Andres Patricio (left) and his wife, Elena López Vasquez, at Campo Blanco, a migrant camp in Washington County. The couple live at the camp with their children, 3-year-old Alenzader Patricio López and 6-month-old Carlos Patricio López.

Graduate students in a Portland State program survey laborers

By TRACIE MORALES
THE OREGONIAN

They straggle in, sweaty and tired, from a day of picking blueberries.

Their workday is ending, but for a group of college students, the day is beginning. It's late afternoon, and the sun is still hot when seasonal workers and students converge at Campo Blanco, a migrant camp in Washington County.

The students are here to take part in a project, to better know and serve the health needs of migrant workers from Mexico. Five students from Portland State University's Graduate School of Social Work and five from a university in Puebla, Mexico, are participating in the Health Worker Outreach Project, organized by Ted Donlan, an assistant PSU professor and project co-director.

The students, who work alongside staff from the Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center, have interviewed more than 90 seasonal workers in the past month. The anonymous surveys ask questions about medical history, chron-

ic illnesses and pains, the last time they saw a doctor.

The students also teach basic health skills. Subjects include personal hygiene, safer sex and loneliness. The workers' children, who stay in the camp during the day, are reminded of such things as the need to brush their teeth and wash their hands. Everyone learns about nutrition — fewer tortillas, more fruits and vegetables — and ways to prevent chronic illnesses, including diabetes and high blood pressure.

Eusebio Herrera, 39, a PSU graduate student, says taking part in the program is a chance to empower people by educating them. A former migrant laborer from Mexico, as his father was before him, Herrera used to prune and harvest Christmas trees in Oregon.

Often, he says, migrants don't believe they deserve an education — they're here to work and that's all. He credits his English, as limited as it used to be, as his motivation to get ahead.

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Health Worker Outreach Project

Details: From July 2 to Aug. 2, students, faculty and health professionals are working at 16 migrant camps in Washington County. The team wants to finish about 120 comprehensive surveys looking at the health status and needs of seasonal workers. The team also teaches health skills.

Why: To better meet the health needs of migrants in the United States and Mexico

Who: Five graduate students from PSU led by faculty members Ted Donlan and Marco Polo Tellez de Vasso; five university students from Mexico led by Dr. Edgar E. Orea Cardoso

Collaborators: Portland State University, Universidad Popular Autonoma del Estado de Puebla in Mexico, Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center

Sponsors: Oregon Community Foundation, Portland State University

Project's future: Uncertain; depends on funding. Organizers hope to continue next summer.

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Social work: Survey results will be used in U.S., Mexico

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Migrants struggle with language barriers and emotional obstacles, such as fear and shame, he says. Compounding those problems are severe mental health issues, such as depression. To many workers, mental illness is considered a weakness.

"But it's not," he says. "We can work 60 to 80 hours in the field because it makes us feel tough."

When their 132-question surveys are completed at this camp and others in Washington County, the students will compile the information into a report that they'll distribute to the Virginia Garcia center and the state of Oregon. The information is intended to shape health programs tailored to the needs of seasonal workers.

In Mexico, the information will help health workers understand the needs of migrants who return to their native country. A medical doctor from the state of Puebla, Edgar E. Orea Cardoso, leads the group of Mexican students, who are teaching the PSU students how to establish trust and better relate to the workers.

Most of the workers at this camp are from the state of Oaxaca in Mexico. Hardly any speak English. For many, Spanish is their second language. Their first is an indigenous language, such as Zapoteco, Mixteco or Nahuatl.

Jessica Green, 27, a social-work graduate student at PSU, says her experience with the project has influenced what she will do after she graduates.

Green, who says her passion is working with children, sits cross-legged on the ground among a group of boys and girls. They imitate her hand gestures as she sings "Itsy Bitsy Spider" in both English and Spanish.

"I definitely want to help the Latino community because there's a need for Spanish-speaking social workers," she

says.

The reception from the kids delights her. "They're so excited to learn," she says. "They're just

hungry for it."

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The making of “Taking health care to migrants in the field” by Tracie Morales

I walked into *The Oregonian*'s downtown office, and I saw a glaring, red light on my answering machine. The day this story published, I had received phone messages and emails from readers, who opposed the use of tax dollars to conduct migrant worker health surveys. Some were vicious, nasty and mean. But, I was relieved. My work had made an impression, created response and started a dialogue. Mission accomplished.

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