Guidance for Migrant Farmworkers and their Employers

1. Introduction

This guidance is intended for North Carolina farm owners, agricultural employers, farm labor contractors, or anyone who provides housing or employs migrant farmworkers. Farmworkers are a uniquely vulnerable population given the many barriers to healthcare access they experience, such as: language barriers, lack of independent transportation, lack of insurance, fear regarding immigration status, and unfamiliarity with local resources and systems. Due to these determinants of health, the following recommendations have been made with consideration of COVID-19 in migrant labor camps.

COVID-19 can spread easily in settings where many people are in close proximity, such as the residential facilities that house migrant farmworkers. Anyone who provides housing for migrant workers should implement plans to:

• prevent exposure and spread of the virus that causes COVID-19
• provide care for individuals with suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19
• encourage workers to stay up to date with their vaccines and use other layered prevention strategies.

Growers can determine, in collaboration with local county health teams (i.e., health departments, cooperative extension offices, migrant health clinics, community-based organizations, etc.), how to implement guidance while considering the needs and circumstances of the farmworkers within the context of their operations. Growers should take into account health equity considerations for promoting fair access to health.

Helpful Definitions

• **COVID-19** is the disease caused by the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2.

• **Symptoms of COVID-19** include fever or chills, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, fatigue, muscle or body aches, headache, new loss of taste or smell, sore throat, congestion or runny nose, nausea or vomiting, and diarrhea. This list does not include all possible symptoms. It is important to note that many individuals with COVID-19 experience very mild symptoms or no symptoms. The CDC will continue to update this list of symptoms as more is learned about COVID-19.

• **Conditions with increased risk of severe outcomes**

• **Isolation** is separating people with confirmed COVID-19 or with signs or symptoms of infection from people who are not infected.

• **Quarantine** is keeping people who have been exposed to COVID-19, but have no symptoms themselves, away from each other and other people.

• A county’s **COVID-19 Community Level** is a measure of the impact of COVID-19 illness on health and healthcare systems. CDC recommends using county COVID-19 Community Levels to help determine which COVID-19 prevention measures to use for individuals and communities.

Contacts and Numbers

Make sure that you have emergency contact information for each worker who is willing to provide it. Obtaining more than one emergency contact name and number is recommended. Post important phone numbers and addresses in your camps.
• Post the phone number of your closest Community Health Center or farmworker health clinic so workers can call for health care services from their housing facility. Facilitate access to these services by ensuring access to a telephone and wireless internet.

• Post your camp address so that workers can call 911 for emergency assistance.

• Post the address and phone number of your local health department so workers can call for assistance.

• Post the phone number of the closest Farmworker Health Outreach Worker so your workers can call for education and assistance. To find the name and number of the outreach worker, click here.

• Contact Agricultural Safety & Health Bureau, at the NC Department of Labor if you have any questions or concerns regarding farmworker safety, health and/or farmworker housing at 919-707-7810.

2. Prevention Strategies to Reduce Transmission of COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) in Migrant Farmworker Camps

People who are up to date on vaccines have much lower risk of severe illness and death from COVID-19 compared with unvaccinated people. When making decisions about community prevention strategies and individual preventive behaviors, in addition to vaccination, employers and workers should consider the COVID-19 Community Level in the county, as recommended by the CDC. Layered prevention strategies — like staying up to date on vaccines, screening testing, ventilation and wearing masks — can help limit severe disease and reduce the potential for strain on the healthcare system. Layered prevention strategies should be implemented on farms and in housing to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Outbreaks can and do occur in migrant farmworker communities. Careful planning and layered prevention can help farmworkers limit transmission, avoid outbreaks when possible, and contain outbreaks when they do occur. Additional Department of Labor, Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) guidance for agricultural workers can be accessed here.

Key prevention strategies include:

• Offer and promote COVID-19 vaccination

• Consistent and correct use of masks when necessary

• Quarantine and Isolation

• Physical distancing

• Testing for COVID-19

• Maintaining healthy environments (increased ventilation and cleaning)

• Handwashing and respiratory etiquette

• Isolate and stop working when sick and get tested

• Cleaning and disinfection

Provide language appropriate signs with information on how to implement these layered prevention strategies.

Vaccines and Boosters

COVID-19 vaccines available in the United States are effective at protecting people from serious illness, hospitalization, and death. As with other diseases, people are best protected from COVID-19 when they stay up-to-date with the recommended vaccines. Individuals are up-to-date with COVID-19 vaccines when they have received all doses in the primary series and all recommended boosters, when eligible. Vaccine recommendations are different depending on age, strength of immune system, first vaccine received, and time since last dose.

• Use CDC’s COVID-19 booster tool to learn if and when you can get boosters to stay up to date with your COVID-19 vaccines.
Learn more about COVID-19 vaccine recommendations specifically for people who are moderately or severely immunocompromised.

There are several ways to find a vaccine provider. Individuals can get their COVID-19 vaccine doses at the same location, or different locations. It is never too late to get the added protection offered by completing a primary series or getting a COVID-19 booster. If someone received COVID-19 vaccines outside the United States, whether they are up-to-date depends on which COVID-19 vaccine (and how many doses) they received. Learn more about when people vaccinated outside the United States are considered fully vaccinated.

Learn more about getting the COVID-19 vaccine.

3. Outbreak Response

Shared housing in agricultural settings is considered a low-risk congregate setting. This is due to a lower risk of severe health outcomes (such as hospitalizations and death) compared to high risk congregate settings such as long-term care facilities. Therefore, NCDHHS recommends individuals in migrant farmworker settings follow the general population guidance for isolation and quarantine. For more information, please visit CDC’s Quarantine and Isolation page.

Suspected

If a worker is demonstrating symptoms of COVID-19, have them stop working immediately and isolate from other workers. CDC isolation guidance should be followed. Arrangements should be made for them to consult with a medical provider and to be tested as soon as possible after symptom onset. If the worker needs to be seen at a healthcare facility, call the medical provider in advance so healthcare workers can take appropriate precautionary measures.

Exposed

Workers who have been exposed to COVID-19 should follow the CDC’s Updated Quarantine & Isolation Guidance.

Workers who test positive for COVID-19

Contact your local health department as required by OSHA. ALL workers who test positive for COVID-19, regardless of vaccination status, must stop working and remain in isolation following CDC isolation guidance. Workers in isolation may not work, even if they are asymptomatic. Remember to provide identification documents to any worker being moved to alternate housing and to notify the NC Department of Labor of their move.

In addition to notifying your local health department, it is required that you notify Beth Rodman, Agricultural Safety & Health Bureau Chief, at the NC Department of Labor. If you have any questions or concerns regarding farmworker safety and/or questions related to farmworker housing contact Beth Rodman at 919-707-7810 or beth.rodman@labor.nc.gov.

Make sure workers in isolation have enough food, water and medications as they will not be able to go to the store. Ensure they can communicate with family members. Check frequently on the ill worker in isolation to monitor for worsening symptoms. Some infected people will develop severe symptoms that will require hospitalization. This can happen quite suddenly and may be life-threatening.

Workers do not need to test negative prior to returning to work following appropriate isolation as workers may continue to test positive for up to three months after recovery even though they will no longer infect others. If a worker was symptomatic, end isolation after 5 full days if they are fever-free for 24 hours (without the use of fever-reducing medication) and symptoms are improving. If the worker did not have symptoms, end isolation after at least 5 full days after a positive test. If a worker got very sick from COVID-19 or they have a weakened immune system, they should isolate for at least 10 days and consult with a doctor before ending isolation.

In addition to stopping work and isolating, workers who test positive for COVID-19 should follow the recommended guidance from the CDC:

- Take precautions until day 10.
- Wear a well-fitting mask for 10 full days when around others.
- Do not go to places where you are unable to wear a mask.
Do not travel until a full 10 days after your symptoms started or the date your positive test was taken if you had no symptoms.

Avoid being around people who are more likely to get very sick from COVID-19.

### Housing Resources

It is recommended to have housing prepared ahead of time in case a farmworker becomes ill and needs to quarantine or isolate. One thing growers can do is reserve rooms on their farm ahead of time for sick workers. Keep in mind that these living quarters must go through the same approval process as other farmworker housing by NCDOL. Another option is to connect with local partners who can help provide housing or reimburse those who need it.

See below for Resources to Secure Isolation and Quarantine Housing:

**Option 1: Additional farmworker housing on site or vacant migrant farm housing in the nearby area**

- If there is a known available migrant housing option in another location, the grower must call NCDOL to see if the housing is approved. If it is not approved, NCDOL will determine what steps must be taken to obtain certification or emergency approval. Workers cannot be moved to housing that has not been certified or approved by NCDOL. If you have any questions or concerns regarding farmworker safety and/or questions related to farmworker housing, contact Beth Rodman at 919-707-7810 or beth.rodman@labor.nc.gov.

**Option 2: Review NCS-Access Point list and call to see if they can provide housing support**

- If the above link does not lead to available housing options, see Option 3 below or contact Angel Gaona with the North Carolina Farmworker Health Program (NCFHP) at angel.gaona@dhhs.nc.gov or Robin Tutor at North Carolina Agromedicine Institute at tutorr@ecu.edu.

**Option 3: North Carolina Farmworker Health Program & Agromedicine Institute COVID-19 Farmworker Isolation & Quarantine Reimbursement Resources**

- NCFHP and North Carolina Agromedicine Institute can support with situations not covered by the options listed above. Available levels of financial assistance vary. Please reach out to find what resources are available. For more information, contact NCFHP, angel.gaona@dhhs.nc.gov or North Carolina Agromedicine Institute, tutorr@ecu.edu.

### 4. Legal Considerations

- Failure to provide separate housing for infected workers could reasonably be expected to cause death or serious harm to the uninfected workers, which violates the Migrant Housing Act of North Carolina requirement that housing providers immediately provide safe housing.

- Forcing or requiring an infected or exposed farmworker to return home prior to clearance for travel by the health department would present a public health risk and could be subject to prosecution pursuant to North Carolina's laws governing communicable disease control (G.S. 130A-25)

- If workers would like to make a CONFIDENTIAL complaint about unsafe working or migrant labor camp living conditions in English or Spanish, they can contact the NC Department of Labor at 1-800-NC-LABOR.

- It is unlawful for employers and migrant housing providers to retaliate or to take any adverse employment action against any worker who files a complaint or who otherwise asserts their right to safe working and/or migrant housing conditions in NC under the NC Retaliation Employment Discrimination Act.

### 5. Other Resources

- [NC DHHS COVID-19 Website](#)
- [CDC Coronavirus Website](#)
- [NC Environmental Cleaning Guidance](#)
- [North Carolina Department of Labor's Agricultural Safety and Health Bureau](#)