

# Meeting Minutes: Governor's Committee on the Safety, Health, and Wellbeing of Agricultural and Food Processing Workers

**DATE: 06/21/2021**

**MINUTES PREPARED BY: CARRIE RIGDON**

## Attendance

### Present

- **Hamse Warfa**, Deputy Commissioner, Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development
- **Gary Wertish**, President, Minnesota Farmers Union
- **Rena Wong**, Director of Organizing, United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 663
- **Colin Laffey**, Staff Attorney, Agricultural Worker Project, Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services (SMRLS)
- **Emilia Gonzalez Avalos**, Executive Director, Unidos MN
- **Rodolfo Gutierrez**, Executive Director, HACER
- **Susan Bishop**, Supervisor, Minnesota Department of Health, and Migrant Agricultural Worker Response Lead, ICS
- **Nicole Blissenbach**, Deputy Commissioner, Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry
- **Tamara Nelsen**, Executive Director, Minnesota AgriGrowth Council
- **Kiza Olson**, CHS Administrator, Meeker-McLeod-Sibley Community Health Services
- **Sarah Berry**, Public Health Director, Waseca County | CHS Administrator, Le Sueur – Waseca Community Health Board
- **Kevin Paap**, President, Minnesota Farm Bureau
- **Maureen Ramirez**, Director of the Office of Economic Opportunity, Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development
- **Carrie Rigdon**, Operations and Planning Section Manager, Minnesota Department of Agriculture
- **Kristi Halvarson**, Executive Director, Community Health Service, Inc.
- **Lorrie Janatopoulos**, CareerForce Director, Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development

## Absent

- **Andrea Vaubel**, Deputy Commissioner, Minnesota Department of Agriculture
- **Jennifer Christensen**, President, United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 1189
- **Mike Zastoupil**, Food Access Associate, Minnesota Department of Health

## Guests Present

None

## Agenda

- 1:00 PM **Welcome**
- 1:05 PM **Approve Minutes & Meeting Agenda**
- 1:10 PM **Public Comments**
- 1:15 PM **Member Introductions**
- 1:35 PM **Review Information from Pre-Planning Meeting**
- 1:50 PM **Large Group Discussion**
- 2:45 PM **Final Thoughts & Next Steps**
- 3:00 PM **Adjourn**

## Meeting notes

Co-Chair Hamse Warfa welcomed everyone to start the meeting.

## Public Comments

None.

## Member Introductions

### **Gary Wertish – President, Minnesota Farmers Union**

The Farmers Union has been supporting the interests of farmers since it was established nationally in 1902 and there has been a Minnesota Farmers Union since 1918. The Farmers Union started as a way for farmers to get a better price for their products. The roots of CHS, the cooperative fuel refiner, go back to the Farmers Union which started it (then Farmers Union Oil) when Standard Oil would not make deliveries to farms.

Gary has farmed all his life and currently assists his son with farming. He was an early investor in sugar beets. He has employed a lot of migrant labor and developed many close relationships with migrant families. He has fond memories of his daughters working alongside migrant families, many that had the same aged children.

Gary and the Farmers Union are looking at how we can get more families into farming. Labor is a big issue and he is working on helpful immigration reform. It is a two way street to help each other: employers need availability of a good workforce and workers need a safe environment and to be protected.

**Nicole Blissenbach – Deputy Commissioner, Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry**

Nicole grew up on a farm in southern Minnesota that raised both crops and livestock. She attended University of Minnesota-Morris and for part of her time there worked for a large dairy operation. After attending law school at the University of Minnesota Law School, she started work at a firm representing unions and plaintiffs specializing in labor and employment law. Nicole moved to a position in the legal department at Education Minnesota, the union that represents teachers and other educators throughout the state. In June of 2019, she joined the Walz-Flanagan administration, first as an Assistant Commissioner with the Department of Labor and Industry and later transitioning to her current role as Deputy Commissioner.

Nicole has a long history in employment and labor law and has been a worker advocate her entire professional career. In her current role at Labor and Industry she oversees the following units: Labor Standards, OSHA Compliance, OSHA Workplace Safety Consultation, Office of General Counsel, Research and Statistics, and Projects and Planning. She lives in Minneapolis with her family. She has two kids and acquired a puppy during the pandemic that just turned one year old.

**Tamara Nelsen – Executive Director, Minnesota AgriGrowth Council**

Tamara is a Minnesota native of Sibley County and both grandfathers were farmers. At age 13, she left home to attend Shattuck-St. Mary's in Faribault – a college preparatory school which was at one point, a working farm. Tamara then attended Stanford University, also referred to as “the Farm”, where she studied international relations and international trade. She spent 11 years in Washington, D.C., working in agriculture, food, and trade policy and then in ag marketing – where she loved working with farmers. She moved in Illinois in 1998 to work in marketing and trade at the Illinois Farm Bureau and after a 20-year career there, came back to Minnesota.

AgriGrowth is a membership association that includes all sizes of farmers, farm associations, academic institutions, cooperatives, lenders, food companies, and other trade associations supporting agri-food. AgriGrowth also works closely with Minnesota Farmers Union and the Minnesota Farm Bureau.

There are many companies that rely on seasonal and migrant workers and Tamara is happy to reach out to AgriGrowth members to help work on solutions.

## Review Information from Pre-Planning Meeting

Carrie presented an overview of data that was provided during a pre-planning meeting on 6/16/2021 by three sources:

1. Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED), which collects worker data through its Unemployment Insurance system and estimates from its Migrant Seasonal Farmworker Services Program
2. Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services (SMRLS), which collects information on types, location, and condition of housing through its Outreach Program
3. U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service (USDA NASS), which collects farm labor information through its Farm Labor Survey and its Census of Agriculture

More details were provided to the Committee in the following documents:

- Summary\_PrePlanning\_06.18.2021.docx
- USDA NASS General Farm Labor Data.pptx

Rodolfo requested that we check with DEED on whether the Committee could get the Unemployment Insurance data, which is located at <https://mn.gov/deed/data/data-tools/unemployment-insurance-statistics/>, in a format that would allow for looking at the data more closely.

## Large Group Discussion

Maureen led the Committee in discussing themes and questions around data, including “what is your ‘Pie in the sky’ – in a perfect world, what would it look like to have all the data we need?”, “what information are you looking for to understand the agricultural worker population?” and “what are you collecting and what is missing?”

### **What are you collecting and what is missing?**

Nicole offered that nobody has great numbers of workers in the industry. Department of Labor and Industry has some information from DEED on how many workers are here on visas, but no one area is tracking the numbers of workers in agriculture. It is also hard to pull out agricultural employment data specifically. Many agencies and entities use NAICS (North American Industry Classification System) Codes and more than one code can apply to the type of work – for example, canneries or meat processing.

Susan shared her experience when the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) was working on pandemic response for migrant workers. While demographic data such as ethnicity is collected for other things, it isn’t collected for employer groups and have no way to drill down to the specific migrant worker populations.

Kristi explained that Federally Qualified Health Centers such as Community Health Service do collect a lot of demographic information for their patients, but it is just for patients and they

are missing data for all of the farm workers that don't present as patients at her clinic. The information they do collect they have it at the ZIP code level. The U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) has national health center data at the ZIP code level and Uniform Data System (UDS) Mapper, [udsmapper.org](https://udsmapper.org), can map that data down to the ZIP code level.

On the subject of mapping, Susan asked if we have a map of the concentration of farm workers and what crops or areas they work in. MDH has some information from early on in the pandemic response that was comparing the USDA Ag Census and the U.S. Census. It looked like there was a strong correlation between density of agricultural areas and density of Latinx ethnicity. She also offered that MDH has a staff person who could potentially assist with some mapping.

Tamara asked if there are other countries that have models the Committee could learn from. There may be other countries that rely on migrant workers that have programs in place to identify recent migrant and agricultural workers in an effort to reach them and provide services. She gave an example of New Zealand apple growers from Columbia and parts of Brazil that are tracked by the government for providing resources.

### **Who are the agricultural workers? What type of work are they doing?**

Kristi shared that U.S. Health and Human Services (HHS) may have a different definition of agricultural worker. For example, a meat packer is not classified as an agricultural worker.

Colin echoed that difference. SMRLS defines a worker tending to animals while they are alive as an agricultural worker, but when that animal goes to slaughter and further processing, those workers are not defined as agricultural workers.

There may also be a need to map the different definitions of agricultural worker and which agencies and entities are using which definition. This will be important since each of those subgroups may have different wellness needs.

### **Do any of our employer groups do any surveying of workers?**

Tamara offered that AgriGrowth just completed a short survey of some of its members (25) on workforce needs including types of skills and where they are finding workers, but it was not focused on migrant or immigrant workers. Anecdotally, she has heard stories of employers helping workers get citizenship, but it isn't something that AgriGrowth routinely collects. She would be open to surveying their members. However, employers do have concerns about frightening employees if they were to ask for additional information.

### **Gender information**

Maureen observed that no one has mentioned gender, is that information that the committee needs?

Colin shared that it would depend on the type of agricultural worker, as H-2A workers tend to be more men and migrant workers – those traveling from Texas, for example – tend to be an equal mix of men and women.

Kristi shared that 55% of Community Health Service's patients are women and that may be because women are more likely to see healthcare services.

## Final Thoughts & Next Steps

The planning staff will draft a work plan for the Committee on getting a report to the Governor's office in August.

The Committee has expressed the desire to do more small group break-out sessions during the meeting. That was not available for today's meeting since the host of the Microsoft Teams meeting invitation needs to be present to initiate those break-outs. We will work to get those opportunities in future meetings.

The next meeting is scheduled for Monday, July 5, which is a state holiday. The planning staff will work to find an alternate date and time.

Tamara made the motion to adjourn the meeting, Susan seconded. Meeting adjourned at 2:34 pm.

## Decisions

- The minutes from the 5/27/2021 and the 6/7/2021 meetings were approved with the recognition that a typo in Sarah Berry's affiliation (La Seuer needs to change to Le Sueur) will be fixed. Tamara made the motion to approve the minutes; Nicole seconded; all in favor; none opposed.

## Action items

- Planning staff will request data from DEED in a format that can be analyzed by the Committee
- Tamara will connect with partners from New Zealand and the E.U. on model programs for tracking migrant and immigrant workers for providing resources
- Planning staff will draft a work plan for the Committee on getting a report to the Governor's office in August

## Next Meeting

The next meeting, on July 5, 2021, falls on a federal and state holiday. The planning staff will work to find an alternate date and time.

The Committee will resume its bi-weekly Monday meetings on July 19, 2021.