



April 7, 2020

Helen Angus

Deputy Minister, Ministry of Health

Matthew Anderson

President and CEO, Ontario Health

Dear Ms. Angus and Mr. Anderson,

We write to you to follow up on the [letter we sent to Minister Elliott and Minister McNaughton on March 24](#) regarding supports for seasonal farm workers during the COVID-19 crisis.

We want to thank the Ministry of Health for releasing the [Guidance for Temporary Foreign Workers \(TFWs\)](#). The document is a step in the right direction but we still have some question and concerns regarding the implementation of these guidelines and additional supports required to protect seasonal farm workers during the pandemic. We believe these concerns are best discussed during a meeting and hope you will find the time to talk to us as soon as possible. Time is of essence as seasonal farm workers are starting to arrive in Ontario and we need to prevent a possible spread of COVID-19 in their communities like the one that happened recently in British Columbia.

Several Alliance members serve seasonal workers in multiple regions, including Windsor-Essex, Chatham Kent, Harrow, Brantford, St Catharine's, Brock, Port Hope and other communities in between. We also work closely with Occupational Health Clinic for Ontario Workers. Here are the questions and concerns we want to bring to your attention.

- The Guidance for Temporary Farm Workers needs to be communicated in a clear and consistent manner to all employers of seasonal farm workers. The requirement for arriving workers not to work during the initial two week isolation period has been clearly stated. However, recently confusion on this has been identified among some Ontario employers. We recommend following up with employers, and specifically providing them with the rationale for this requirement to strengthen their understanding of its importance and to support compliance.
- In addition, the symptom screening at airports and the guidance to immediately self-isolate for all travelers entering Canada do not adequately address safety concerns associated with the arrival and housing of these workers. The general guidance for arriving travelers assumes they are to self-isolate either independently, or as a small family unit, who may have had the same exposure risk. This is not the case with these workers. As this program brings workers from various regions and countries, with the potential to have different exposure conditions, each worker is an

individual vector and this should be considered when thinking about bringing them together into group housing, and the shared accommodations. The confirmed exposure of TFWs on a Kelowna farm, demonstrates the high risk for COVID-19 spread, when large groups of workers share accommodations. Further methods to protect workers from exposure should be considered, such as testing for COVID-19 upon arrival and/or having workers wear surgical masks.

- Proper accommodations that allow for physical distancing and self-isolation are key to preventing the spread of the virus. The [Guidance for Employers of Temporary Foreign Workers](#) released by Employment and Social Development Canada provides some recommendations regarding accommodations but the document lacks clarity and leaves important gaps, for instance it doesn't specify the number of people per washroom, kitchen, etc. In addition, without enforcement mechanisms and inspection of accommodations, there is no guarantee the guidelines will be followed. We know that most employers want to do the right thing but don't have enough resources, clear recommendations and supports.
- Inspection of accommodations typically falls to Public Health Units in Ontario but they are overstretched already and would require additional resources to do it properly. Same applies for additional resources for public health and primary care to provide education, prevention and care, including mental health supports, when needed. All education and health promotion materials need to be available in multiple languages. Proper orientation is key to making sure workers understand protocols and procedures as well as resources and supports available to them.
- In addition, workers should be provided with a clear channel to report any concerns they may have regarding the safety of their accommodations. This reporting has previously been offered by local public health. Ensuring this reporting can be done in worker languages is important. Also, prior to COVID 19, many workers have reported feeling hesitant to report concerns as they fear losing their jobs. Under these circumstances, it is imperative that workers be encouraged to report unsafe conditions by a direct method in the language they are comfortable with.
- All workers need to be made aware of their rights and entitlements. We need to make it clear that they will not be fired or repatriated if they become sick, and we need to clarify and inform them of their qualification for EI, Canadian Emergency Response Benefits, as well as WSIB support for workplace illness in the case they become sick and can't work. It is also important to note that they will need help navigating these systems and filling out applications. Therefore, we need to identify how these workers will receive information about these supports, and allocate appropriate resources to help them access them if they need to.

We look forward to hearing from you when we can meet to discuss these concerns and determine next steps.

Seasonal farm workers are important members of our community and we need to make concern for their health and safety one of our top priorities. We will not flatten the pandemic's curve if we do not

immediately work to eliminate the risks facing this population. Community-led organizations are ready and willing to support you in developing solutions to this crisis.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Adrianna Tetley". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Adrianna Tetley
CEO, Alliance for Healthier Communities

cc:

- Nina Aaron, Health Protection and Surveillance Policy and Programs Branch
- Dianne Alexander, Health Promotion and Prevention Policy and Programs Branch
- Clint Shingler, Director, Health System Emergency Management
- Bruce Lauckner, Transitional Regional Lead West, Ontario Health
- Renato Discenza, Transitional Regional Lead East, Ontario Health
- Rita Taillefer, Executive Director, Windsor- Essex Community Health Centre
- Peter Szota, Executive Director, Grand River Community Health Centre
- Nancy Garner, Executive Director, Quest Community Health Centre
- Sherri Saunders, Integrated Executive Director, Chatham Kent Community Health Centres
- Janet McPherson, Executive Director, Brock Community Health Centre
- Duff Sprague, Executive Director, Community Health Centres of Northumberland
- Margo Reilly, Executive Director, Harrow Health Centre: A Family Health Team
- Michelle Tew, Occupational Health Nurse, Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers
- Eduardo Huesca, Program Coordinator, Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers
- EOC Operations (MOH)