

Ventura County Farmworker Housing Study, Phase 2 and 3 Summary Report: *Survey of the County's Agricultural Employers, Farmworkers, and Stakeholders*



COORDINATED AND
FUNDED BY THE
COUNTY OF
VENTURA, AND ALL
TEN CITIES; AND IN
PARTNERSHIP
WITH *HOUSE FARM
WORKERS!*

Prepared for the County of Ventura and *House Farm Workers!*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While the main body of this report includes extensive documentation of the Phase 2 and 3 task methodologies and detailed information on the results of Stakeholder Interviews, the Employer Survey, the Farmworker Survey, and the Farmworker Focus Group Session, this section highlights key findings from the research. Common themes are listed at the end of this section.

Estimated Farmworker Population Living in Ventura County

In the Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation (SALC) Economic Contributions of Ventura County Agriculture report of 2022, BAE estimated that the annual average agricultural worker employment in Ventura County was approximately 25,000. Ventura County's 2021-2029 Housing Element included farmworker employment estimates between approximately 18,500 and 36,500 farmworkers and indicated that, "based on information received from the Ventura County Agricultural Commissioner and the local *House Farm Workers!* Task Force, the higher end of the range is more accurate and should be used for estimating farmworker housing needs." There is more than a one-to-one relationship between reported agricultural employment (jobs) and farmworkers due to factors such as job turnover, informally employed workers, and use of workers employed by farm labor contractors based outside of the county. The number of farmworkers in Ventura County is likely between the 25,000 jobs figure and the high end of the farmworker estimate in the County's Housing Element.

Considering that the 25,000 figure represents employment of documented farmworkers who work for employers based in Ventura County and the farmworker survey results indicate that nearly all Ventura County farmworkers also live in Ventura County, it represents a minimum number of farmworkers living in the county. Informally employed farmworkers, farmworkers employed by businesses that are based outside of Ventura County, and other factors mentioned above will increase this number.

Key Observations from Stakeholder Interviews

Key takeaways from the stakeholder interviews conducted from December 2022 to January 2023, are that farmworker representatives, advocates, and agricultural industry representatives all acknowledge the acute challenge of deteriorating housing availability and affordability for farmworkers in Ventura County. Farmworkers' low wages and unique vulnerabilities exacerbate the housing crisis, impacting their ability to provide for their basic needs. As a result of these challenges, employers face difficulties recruiting a sufficient workforce, which in turn can affect industry output and lead to potential changes in crops grown.

Farmworker Representatives, Advocates, and Service Providers

The following are highlights from interviews with farmworker representatives, advocates, and service providers.

Please note that these are high-level summaries and the actual document may contain more nuanced information. It's also important to remember that these are perceptions and experiences reported by the participants, and they may not represent the views of all stakeholders, employers, or farmworkers.

Current Farmworker Housing Situation

- Lack of affordable, suitable housing leads to overcrowding and substandard conditions.
- There are challenges for single men, undocumented workers, and families with legal status but incomes that are too high to qualify for assistance.
- There is increasing utilization of H-2A¹ workers in response to a domestic labor shortage.

Recent Trends

- Rapidly increasing housing rents and competition for resources.
- Farmworker families are getting smaller, and farmworkers are more likely to stay in the county permanently.
- COVID worsened the housing situation, particularly for those ineligible for relief programs due to legal status.
- Farmers moved away from providing worker housing due to increased regulation.

Key Contributing Factors

- Lack of housing supply and rising costs coupled with low farmworker wages.
- Negative attitudes towards farmworkers contribute to NIMBYism².
- Challenges in accessing affordable housing programs for undocumented workers.

Most Pressing Problems

- Limited countywide housing availability and lack of affordable options.
- Farmworker housing needs to be seen as a human right, emphasizing the need for adequate wages and benefits.
- Vulnerability of migrant families and the specific housing need for undocumented workers.

¹ The H-2A Temporary Agricultural Program is a visa program that allows U.S. agricultural employers to address shortages of domestic workers by bringing in non-immigrant foreign workers. These foreign workers perform agricultural labor or services of a temporary or seasonal nature during peak seasons when there is a shortage of available domestic workers. H-2A workers often work for Farm Labor Contractors (FLCs) who provide labor on a contract basis to farm operators. H-2A workers may also be employed directly by agricultural operators. Among other requirements, the employer of H-2A workers must provide them with housing meeting certain standards established by the U.S. government. As a result, it is assumed that H-2A workers working in Ventura County have adequate housing and, thus, they were not surveyed for this study.

² NIMBY stands for “Not in My Backyard” and refers to an attitude whereby members of the public may acknowledge that a certain type of development, such as farmworker housing, may be needed within the community, it is not desirable in close proximity to their personal place of residence, suggesting that the development should occur elsewhere within the community, or not at all.

Barriers and Challenges

- Small growers face challenges due to not having sufficient resources or scale to support provision of housing.
- Capital-intensive nature and management challenges for growers providing housing.
- Limited funding (e.g., capital and/or operating funding) for farmworker housing.
- Restrictions on where multifamily housing can be built and lack of infrastructure in rural areas.

Opportunities

- Leverage recent awareness of the farmworker housing problem to translate into new housing development.
- Community involvement, alternative housing types, and streamlined regulations are potential solutions.
- Consider infill, conversion of existing buildings, and farm labor centers.
- Explore funding from a potential statewide housing bond and local funding sources.

Agricultural Industry Representatives

The following are highlights from interviews with agriculture industry representatives.

Trends in Agriculture Labor Needs

- Specialty crops depend on hand labor; small farms lack economies of scale to invest in automation.
- Increasing usage of H-2A workers is expected.
- A transition to mechanizable crops can be expected if labor supply is insufficient.

Effect of Housing Situation on Agricultural Industry

- Agriculture is limited by labor availability and is impacting crop choices.
- Limited housing availability for H-2A workers affects utilization – more producers would likely use H-2A workers if there was housing available for them.

Current Farmworker Housing Situation

- Many farmworkers live in multigenerational households due to housing costs.
- There is a shortage of housing for single workers and the emphasis has been on providing housing for families.
- Housing is getting harder to find, rents are increasing, and there is limited new construction.

Key Contributing Factors

- Limited housing supply, lack of suitable housing for individuals.
- Increasing competition for housing in general; agriculture is competing with tourism industry for workforce housing.
- Ventura County is transitioning into an urban destination from a rural county.

Most Pressing Problems

- Need for multigenerational housing, services for migrant families, and housing for single workers.
- High cost of living in Ventura County.
- Lack of housing production at all levels.

Barriers and Challenges

- Farmers' short investment horizon and lack of capital for small producers.
- Difficulty in getting housing approvals; long permit processes.
- High cost of living and land costs in Ventura County.

Opportunities

- Incentives for growers to provide housing to meet specific standards.
- Make more land available for housing development.
- Adjust regulations to allow year-round use of farmworker housing.
- Combat NIMBYism through community campaigns and learn from successful projects.

In both stakeholder groups, the need for collaborative efforts, increasing community support, diverse housing solutions, and addressing negative perceptions emerge as potential pathways for addressing the farmworker housing crisis in Ventura County.

Key Observations from Employer Survey

A number of questions in the employer survey focused on the “agricultural workforce” employed by the survey respondents. For the purposes of the survey, “agricultural workforce” was defined as people who earn the majority of their income via agricultural employment, which generally aligns with the definition of “farmworker”, which is how these workers will be referred to hereafter.

Employer Characteristics

The online survey conducted from March to August 2023, attracted participation from 40 respondents representing various agricultural sectors, including berry, orchard, rotational crop, nursery, and farm labor contracting, although citrus and avocado growers were most heavily represented. (See Figure 1) There was representation from respondents operating across the major growing regions in Ventura County. The Ventura County Farm Bureau, Ventura County Agricultural Commissioner, and Advisory Council developed for the Project assisted *HFWS!* to publicize the availability of the survey and invite participation.

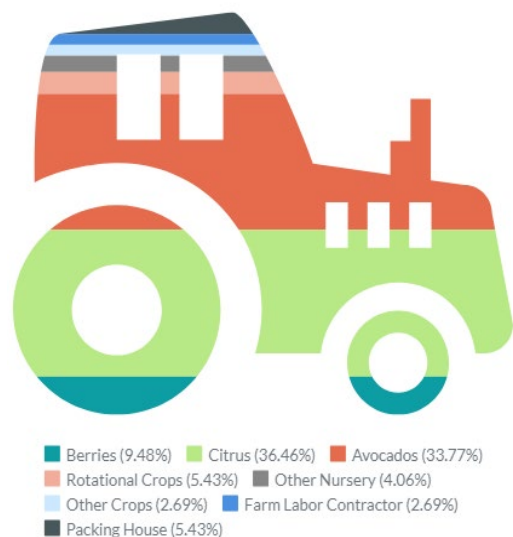


Figure 1: Respondent's Type of Agricultural Operation

Trends in Agricultural Production

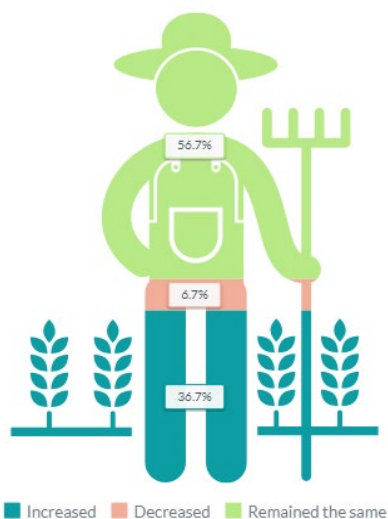


Figure 2: Trends in Agricultural Workforce, Past 5 Years

- Looking forward, six percent of respondents expect a decrease in farmworker labor needs; 39 percent expect an increase; and 45 percent no change in labor needs. (See Figure 3)
- Key reasons cited for changes include expansion of acreage or greenhouse space or limited water availability.

Types of Employees and Hiring Trends:

- 63 percent of respondents expect stable or increasing permanent farmworker employees.
- 52 percent expect stable or increasing local temporary/seasonal farmworker employees.
- 21 percent expect more H-2A farmworkers.
- About 63 percent anticipate future limitations due to lack of workforce availability.

Where Agricultural Employees Live:

- Except for H-2A farmworkers and non-H-2A supervisors, most direct farmworker employees⁴ live permanently within Ventura County.

³ Farmers, ranchers, and outdoor nursery operators reported crop acreage and indoor nursery operators reported building square footage.

⁴ Direct farmworker employees are those hired directly by the agricultural employer as opposed to contracted workers who are provided by a farm labor contractor or temporary staffing agency.

- 63 percent of respondents reported stable land/building space³ use over the past five years.
- The peak farmworker employment months are April and May.
- Seven percent of respondents reported a decrease in farmworker labor needs over the last five years; 57 percent reported no change, and 37 percent reported an increase in labor needs. (See Figure 2)



Figure 3: Anticipated Farmworker Needs, Next 5 Years

Employer-Provided Farmworker Housing

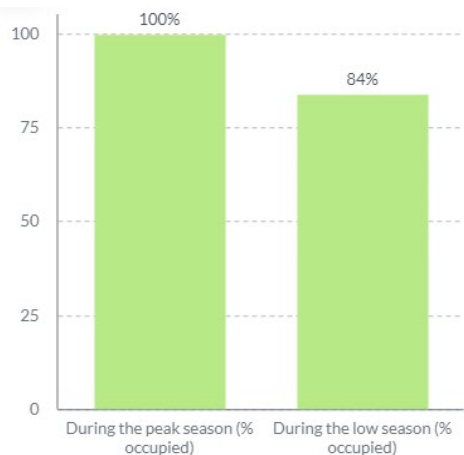


Figure 4: Farmworker Housing Occupancy

- 21 out of 40 respondents provide onsite or offsite housing.
- 43 percent of those who provide housing do so for farm managers, and less than half provide housing for family members of farmworkers.
- Current employer-provided housing is fully occupied during the peak season and 84 percent occupied during the low season. (See Figure 4)
- 100 percent of those employers currently providing farmworker housing intend to continue doing so.

Reasons for Not Providing Housing

- For those who do not provide farmworker housing, reasons include cost, regulatory burden, unwillingness to manage housing, lack of land or infrastructure, lack of control over the decision to provide housing, and other reasons.

Attitudes About Existing Farmworker Housing Supply

- 77 percent of respondents disagree that housing for farmworker families is available in sufficient numbers. (See Figure 5)
- 56 percent disagree that available farmworker housing is of adequate quality.
- 60 percent disagree that farmworker housing is available where needed.
- 68 percent disagree that farmworker housing is affordable to workers.
- Respondents had similar attitudes regarding housing available for farmworkers who are living in Ventura County apart from their families.

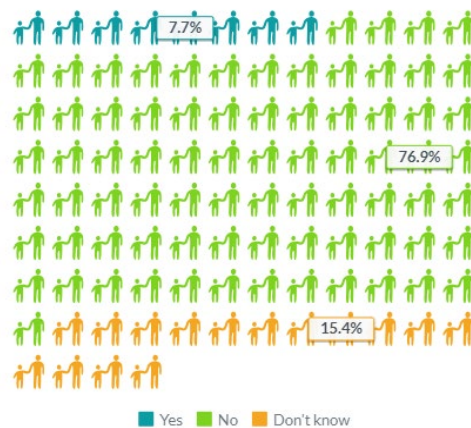


Figure 5: Is Farmworker Housing Available in Sufficient Quantity?

Limitations to Agricultural Operations Due to Housing

- 40 percent of respondents indicate a lack of farmworker housing currently limits operations.
- 72 percent anticipate a shortage of housing will limit their operations in the future.

Key Observations from Farmworker Survey

The survey was conducted in person in five languages, from April to September 2023. Multilingual staff from the County's Farmworker Resource Program conducted the interviews, following consistent procedures. This survey did not include H-2A workers, as their employers are required by law to provide them with housing that is inspected and meets certain federal standards.

Respondent Demographics and Household Characteristics

- 42 percent of survey respondents were male and 57 percent were female and the remainder did not state a specific gender. (See Figure 6)
- The median age was 39 years with the youngest being 18 (the minimum age to qualify to answer the survey) and the oldest being 78.
- 86 percent of survey respondents did not complete high school.
- The majority work on a farm, with "Picker/Harvester" being the most common job title (54.5% of respondents)

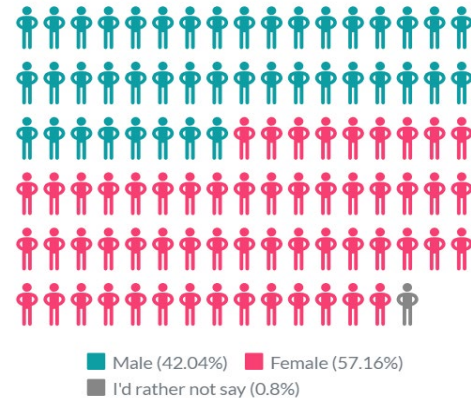


Figure 6: Gender of Survey Participants

Agricultural Employment Characteristics

- 80 percent of respondents work on a farm, ten percent work for a farm labor contractor, and ten percent work in a packing house.
- 97.1 percent of survey respondents work only in agriculture, with 70.8 percent working for only one employer.

Current Housing Situation

- 97.2 percent of survey respondents live in a city or unincorporated town; Oxnard is the most common residence location.
- 87 percent of respondents live in Ventura County year-round.
- The median number of years lived in Ventura County is 15, with a minimum of five months and a maximum of 60 years.
- BAE's analysis of individual survey responses indicates that just over 70 percent of the respondents live in overcrowded conditions and 40.5 percent live in severely overcrowded conditions. Although these calculations should be interpreted with caution, the data indicate that a sizable portion of the farmworker population is living in overcrowded to severely overcrowded conditions.

- Further, 40.1 percent of respondents indicate that they share their bathroom with people from outside their household and 43.1 percent indicated they share the kitchen with people outside of their household; thus it is likely that around 40 to 45 percent of farmworker households are sharing a dwelling unit intended for one household with one or more other households (e.g., doubling up, etc.). (See Figure 7)

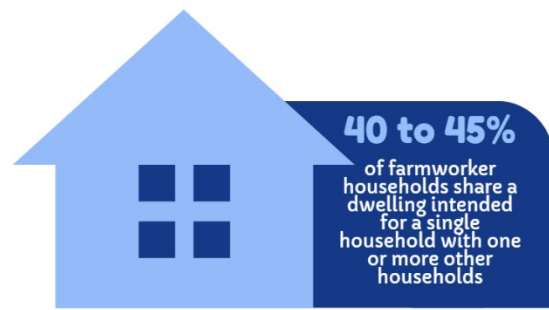


Figure 7: Farmworkers Sharing Dwellings With Other Households

Satisfaction with Current Living Arrangements

- 2.7 percent of survey respondents rate the physical condition of their housing as excellent.
- 77.5 percent say their housing is in sound condition or needs minor maintenance, and 65.2 percent indicate changes or repairs are needed in their homes.
- While about 23 percent of respondents indicated they had no conditions in their housing that needed correction, over one-third indicated their housing unit has six or more problems which, cumulatively, could threaten health, safety, and/or well-being.
- When queried on the types of changes needed to their housing, the most commonly cited issues which, taken individually, would be fairly minor, but which cumulatively might become more significant.

Preferences for Housing

- Almost 40 percent of survey respondents would prefer to live on the farm/ranch where they work.
- 60.4 percent of respondents would prefer living in or near a city/town, with Oxnard being the most preferred location.
- 89.4 percent of respondents would prefer to live in a house versus other types of dwellings. (See Figure 8)



■ House (89.4%)
 ■ Mobile Home/Trailer (2.7%)
 ■ Apartment (6.5%)
 ■ Did not answer (1.4%)

Figure 8: Preferred Housing Type

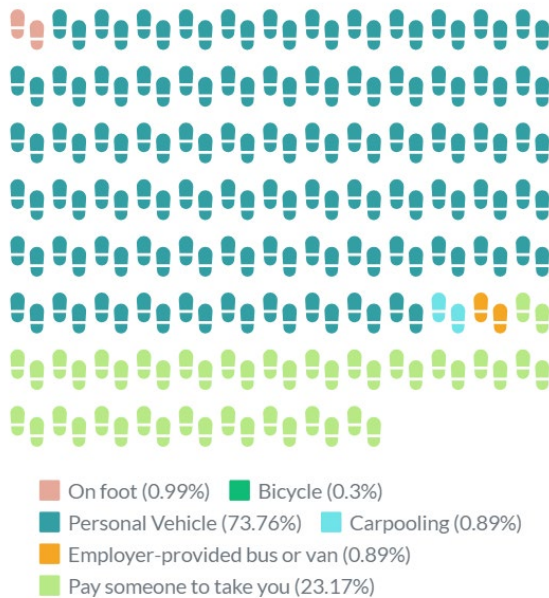
Current Housing Costs

- 92.2 of survey respondents rent from a landlord other than their employer.
- The median monthly payment for renters is \$1,400 per month per household (not per unit), with the lowest rent reported at \$200 per month. Several exceptionally high monthly rent figures were recorded; however, these may have been the result of data entry errors.
- For utilities such as water, sewer, gas, and electricity, no more than about half of respondents responded that they were included in their rent.
- Less than one percent of respondents indicated that meals are included in their rent.

Income

- The median personal earnings in 2022 for survey respondents was \$24,999.
- The median combined household income reported was \$37,499 for 2022.
- 85 percent of survey respondents work 30-50 hours per week in agriculture and earn more than half of their annual income from agricultural employment.

Commute/Transportation to Work



- 74 percent of survey respondents use personal vehicles for commute. (See Figure 9)
- The commute trips are typically between 15 and 45 minutes, one-way.
- The commute home tends to be longer than the commute to work.

Figure 9: Transportation to Work

Social Services

- Survey respondents indicate that they struggle to pay for housing (78.8%), food (58.2%), medical (43.9%), and transportation (32.7%).
- Survey respondents reported difficulty accessing public assistance due to lack of awareness (57.1%), uncertainty about eligibility (52.4%), and language barriers (39%), among other reasons. (See Figure 10)

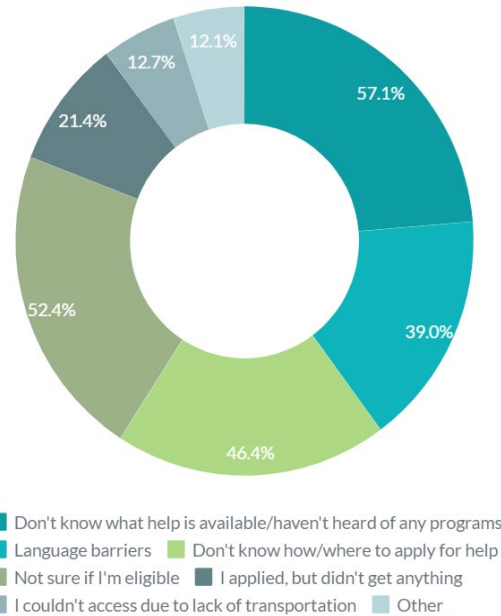


Figure 10: Difficulties Accessing Social Services

Open-Ended Survey Responses

In addition to the structured survey questions, the last question on the Farmworker Survey provided an opportunity for survey respondents to provide any additional information about farmworker housing needs that was not already covered by the survey questions. About 150 survey participants responded to this opportunity and provided a wide range of feedback; however there were some recurring themes in these responses. Most commonly, respondents indicated a need for more affordable rents. Another recurring theme in the comments was the need to expand the supply of affordable housing for farmworkers. A significant number of respondents also identified the need for housing without only limited eligibility requirements, particularly for those without legal immigration/residency status.

Key Observations from Focus Group Meeting

The 34 Focus group participants were generally in agreement with the preliminary farmworker survey results shared at the meeting. In particular, there was strong agreement with the finding that 91 percent of survey respondents would prefer to live in a house but that a substantial proportion (36 percent) of respondents currently live in apartments, and that most farmworkers live in the Oxnard/Port Hueneme area.

Almost all focus group participants have access to a vehicle and use their own vehicle when traveling around the county. Only one participant indicated that they had missed work in the last six months due to lack of transportation, and almost two-thirds of participants indicated that the cost of housing did not affect how they travel to and from work and other destinations; however, cost was by far the challenge related to transportation that was most often cited, with respondents typically reporting monthly transportation costs of \$201 to \$500.

Another significant issue reported by a majority of participants who had access to a vehicle was trouble with parking at either home or work. It is likely that a primary factor contributing to the fact that participants indicated a low level of public transit usage was due to the fact that a strong majority indicated they do not feel safe when using public transit. About two-thirds of participants indicated they did not know who to ask for assistance with transportation issues.

About one-third of respondents indicated they share their home with other families. Confirming their alignment with farmworker survey responses, the vast majority of participants indicated they would like to live in a single-family home. A mapping exercise did not reveal a substantial mismatch between where participants currently live and where they would like to live. Over two-thirds of participants indicated they would be interested in a program such as a forgivable loan to buy a home if they were required to live there for a certain amount of time.

Cost was cited by the largest number of participants (25 responses) as a challenge while looking for suitable housing. The next most common challenge (14 responses), “Too small” was likely also related to cost. This was followed by distance to schools (10 responses). Thirty participants indicated they did not know who to ask for assistance with housing issues while only one participant indicated they did know who to ask. Spanish was the most common primary language spoken in participants’ homes and English was the most common secondary language. The largest number of participants use Medi-Cal for health insurance (16 responses), followed by Employer-Provided health coverage (11 responses) and “None” (9 responses).

The largest number of participants (14) indicated they would like to celebrate special occasions at home, followed by ten who indicated they would like to celebrate at a ranch. When asked, “What makes a community?” the largest number of participants (14) indicated “Sports”, significantly ahead of Church, with six responses, and Schools, with five responses.

At the youth activity table⁵, participants indicated they participate in a range of after school activities. Money was the only family need cited, but various types of assistance were the things that participants most often wished their communities had, including food programs, health care, housing, and transportation. Friends, family, and togetherness were the things that participants liked about their communities.

⁵ The youth activity table was not an official part of the “focus group session”. Participants were family members (i.e., children) of focus group participants.

Areas of Agreement and Divergences

The findings from the Stakeholder Interviews, the Employer Survey, the Farmworker Survey, and the Farmworker Focus Group session underscore the demographic diversity, housing challenges, and preferences of farmworkers in Ventura County. The data reveal particular areas of concern, challenges, and opportunities, and provide valuable insights to utilize in Phase 4 of this Project when developing an Action Plan with support and interventions for farmworker housing targeted to the unique needs and preferences of Ventura County's agricultural workforce. The following identifies some areas of agreement across input collected via the Stakeholder Interviews, the Employer Survey, the Farmworker Survey, and the Farmworker Focus Group Session.

Areas of Agreement

Housing Crisis - All groups acknowledge the acute challenge of deteriorating housing availability and affordability for farmworkers in Ventura County. This is exacerbated by farmworkers' low wages and unique vulnerabilities.

H-2A Workers - Stakeholder interviews and the Employer Survey show agreement that there is increasing utilization of H-2A workers in response to a domestic labor shortage.

Housing Conditions - The Farmworker Survey and Focus Group Session both highlight that the current housing conditions for farmworkers are not adequate, with many compromising on their living arrangements, primarily due to lack of affordability of more suitable housing.

Transportation - Both the Farmworker Survey and Focus Group Session indicate that most farmworkers use personal vehicles for commuting, and the cost of transportation is a significant issue.

Lack of Knowledge of Where to Find Assistance - Both the Farmworker Survey and the Focus Group Session indicate that most farmworkers do not know where to find assistance for housing or social services needs.

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