URBAN HABITAT

2025

SEMILLAS DEL CAMBIO

ADVANCING DIGNIFIED HOUSING FOR FARMWORKERS ON THE SAN MATEO COUNTY COAST

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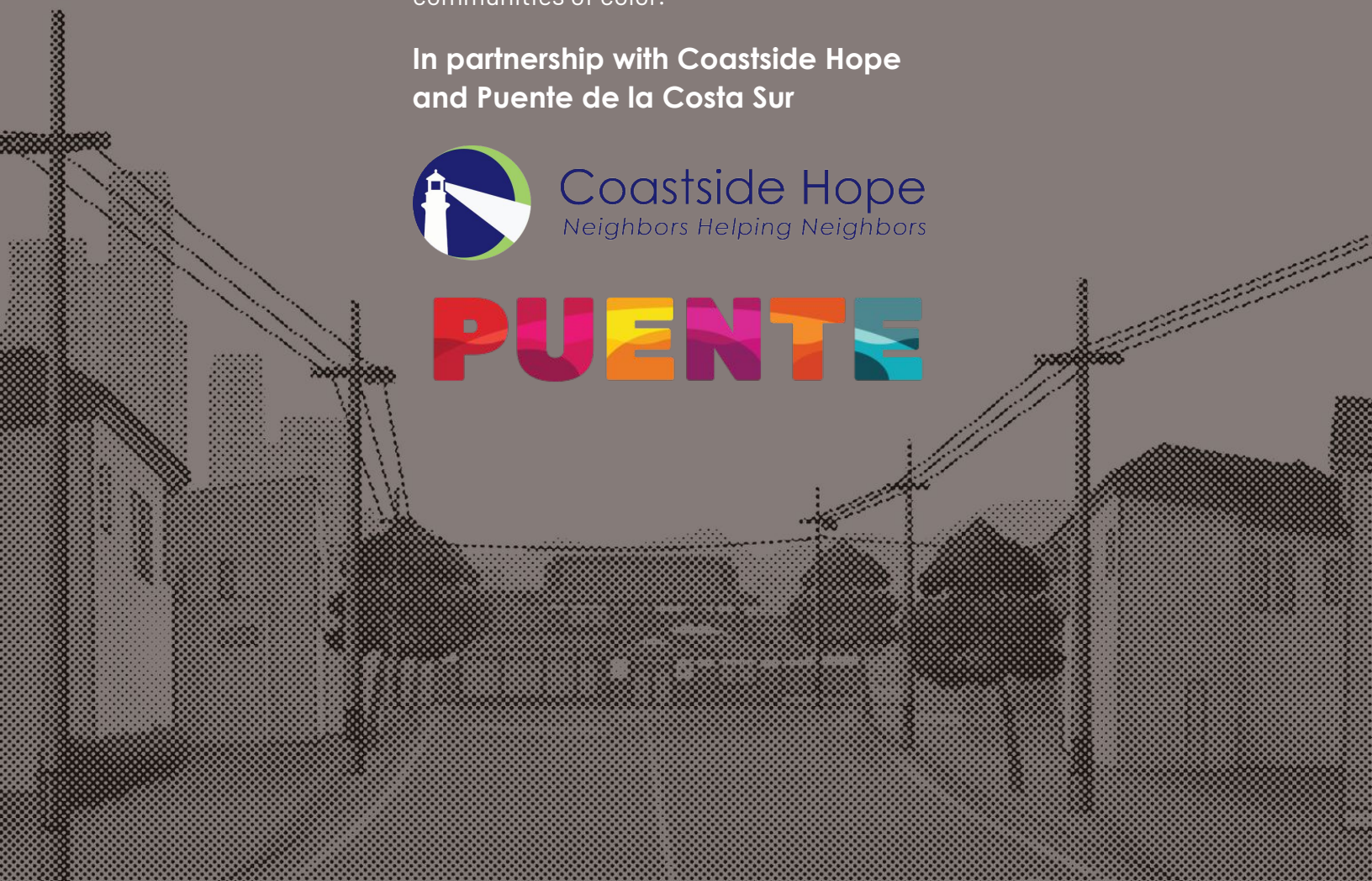
About Urban Habitat

Urban Habitat works to democratize power and advance equitable policies to create a just and connected Bay Area for low-income communities of color. Through strategic partnerships, UH supports increasing the power and capacity in low-income communities and communities of color.

In partnership with Coastside Hope and Puente de la Costa Sur

Coastside Hope
Neighbors Helping Neighbors

PUENTE



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Farmworkers in San Mateo County provide dairy, eggs, produce, meat, and flowers to tens of thousands of Californians, but these communities are facing dire housing circumstances. Based on interviews with 22 San Mateo County farmworkers, this report demonstrates that current state law is not sufficient and provides a framework for policymakers, funders, and other stakeholders to protect farmworker renters, prevent displacement, and advance truly affordable housing with dignity.

FARMWORKERS' KEY TAKEAWAYS:

1. Rents are too high for farmworkers' income, even in subsidized housing. Low pay and hours make it extremely difficult for farmworkers to find housing they can afford.

> Unfortunately us farmworkers are the most marginalized in the workforce. Because we are paid the minimum wage, sometimes what they pay us is not enough to put food on the table and pay the bills... I tell myself I'm just trying to survive.
>
> - **Lorena**, Half Moon Bay

2. The lack of affordable housing leaves farmworkers vulnerable to exploitative and hazardous living situations. In fear of retaliation and eviction, farmworkers frequently have to sacrifice their health, comfort, and privacy in order to stay housed.

> Two of my kids sleep in the kitchen and the other two sleep with me in the bedroom. But we've noticed that mold is starting to spread near the kitchen and it smells bad.
>
> - **Evita**, Half Moon Bay

3. Farmworkers live in constant fear of unemployment, particularly in employee housing. Whether due to accidents, labor disputes, or pregnancy, losing work is devastating for farmworkers, especially for those with dependents. For farmworkers living in employee housing, losing their job can also mean losing their home. Many farmworkers cannot even imagine the possibility of retirement.

> What I feel is that one doesn't feel confident standing up to your boss, because you know that if they don't like the way you act, they can fire you and you'll be left without housing.
>
> - **Marina**, Pescadero

4. Families, especially single mothers, have more difficulty finding affordable housing. Many landlords do not want to rent to farmworkers who are single mothers, which severely limits their housing options and leaves both the mothers and their children more vulnerable than their peers.

> My former housemate's boyfriend also worked in the fields, and because he's a man they would let him rent a place at work. He paid $200 or $300 a month, but lived in a room with eight or ten people. I asked the boss [if I could rent there], but he told me that because I'm a woman he couldn't provide a place for me to live due to safety concerns for me and my child. That's why he prefers to hire only men.
>
> - **Teresa**, Moss Beach

RECOMMENDATIONS TO SUPPORT FARMWORKERS IN THEIR HOUSING

01. Support more outreach, education, and engagement on housing issues by resourcing farmworker organizing and passing policies such as Tenant Right to Organize.

02. Address the gaps in current state tenant protection laws by passing local ordinances that address farmworkers' low wages and particular housing situations, such as employee housing and subleasing.

03. Adopt a proactive rental inspections and licensing (PRIL) process to improve the current code compliance process.

04. Advance community ownership models to help farmworkers achieve permanently affordable housing regardless of employment status.

05. Create more opportunities for deeper and intentional farmworker input to shape future policies in municipal administrative bodies.

INTRODUCTION

San Mateo County is the third wealthiest county in the nation, with a median income of $156,000.[1] It is also home to one of the country's most marginalized and undervalued communities: farmworkers. Largely indigenous and immigrant communities, farmworkers in San Mateo County typically live and work in the unincorporated coastal rural towns known as the Coastside.

The Silicon Valley Community Foundation's 2024 report on farmworker housing estimates that there are roughly 1,300 to 1,600 farmworkers on the Coastside.[2] A quarter of these are seasonal workers, and over 80% have lived in the Bay Area for more than six years.[3] Although agricultural work is year-round, the amount of hours available varies depending on the time of year, with the winter months being much less busy. So, while farmworkers' median hourly wage in the region is $16.30, this ends up only equating to $20,000 - $30,000 annually, depending on one's hours.[4]

With such low wages it is difficult for farmworkers to afford housing in San Mateo County, one of the most expensive real estate markets in the country. Federal sources of assistance, such as Section 8, are often not an option due to their immigration status. Many farmworkers seek assistance from local organizations such as Ayudando Latinos A Soñar (ALAS), Coastside Hope, and Puente de la Costa Sur (Puente). These nonprofits provide vital information, assistance, and a sense of community to farmworkers living on the Coastside. But their help only goes so far in the face of inadequate funding and longstanding classist, racist, and xenophobic policies that keep wages far too low and make it difficult to access social benefits.

Farmworkers live in a unique intersection of immigration, race, and class that has led to decades of abuse and poor conditions. In response, farmworkers have generated a long history of organizing for change.

This report seeks to provide policymakers, philanthropic funders, and other stakeholders with a deeper understanding of farmworkers' housing challenges in order to craft effective policies to build a future where everyone can live in a dignified home.

In partnership with Coastside Hope and Puente, we spoke with 22 farmworkers who shared their expertise, experiences, and the solutions they seek.

Through sharing their background, their hopes, their concerns, and possible solutions, we aim to inspire meaningful action by San Mateo County funders and policymakers to improve housing on the Coastside. It is well past time to follow the lead of farmworkers to find solutions to the housing crisis.

Section 1 of this report shares farmworkers' experiences and challenges with housing: low wages but high costs; uninhabitable conditions; extreme overcrowding; fear of retaliation; fear of accidents and unemployment; unique challenges facing families; migration debt; and increased displacement.

Section 2 identifies problems in current laws and enforcement, and also provides recommendations on how to solve these challenges by supporting farmworkers' organizing, implementing tenant protections, strengthening housing inspections, advancing community ownership models, and empowering farmworker administrative bodies.

photo credit: San Mateo County Planning and Building Division

SECTION 1: FARMWORKERS' EXPERIENCES

photo credit: Puente de la Costa Sur

Farmworkers in San Mateo County provide dairy, eggs, produce and flowers for tens of thousands of Californians. At the inception of the COVID-19 pandemic, farmworkers were designated as "essential workers" who are "in the fields everyday making sure Californians get their food harvested."[5] Yet, while most of us enjoy the benefits of their labor, we have little understanding about the housing affordability crisis they face. This section summarizes the diverse experiences, concerns, and wisdom of 22 farmworkers in finding affordable, dignified housing.

LOW WAGES AND FEW HOURS, BUT HIGH COSTS

Although agricultural work is highly technical and labor-intensive, it is a notoriously low-wage job. Especially with costs steadily rising, just working hard is not enough to save money. In 2021, San Mateo County's crop value was approximately $98 million, but the average farmworker makes only $20,000 - $30,000 annually.[6]

For over 25 years, Lorena has lived and worked in Half Moon Bay as a farmworker at a flower nursery. "Unfortunately us farmworkers are the most marginalized in the workforce. Because we are paid the minimum wage, sometimes what they pay us is not enough to put food on the table and pay the bills... I tell myself I'm just trying to survive."

José is a generational farmworker whose father worked in Half Moon Bay for 40 years. He loves his work but struggles to support his family on his salary. "Most ranchers have about five months where you're not producing anything, and during that time you still have to pay the rent," José shares. "I pay the rent and the bills, and put away a little bit of money, but the money I set aside runs out in the first two months. The time for farmers to rest is in December, but what good are vacations if there's no money? There's nothing left for the rest of the time, and that's when it gets tough."

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> **I PAY THE RENT AND THE BILLS, AND PUT AWAY A LITTLE BIT OF MONEY, BUT THE MONEY I SET ASIDE RUNS OUT IN THE FIRST TWO MONTHS.**
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>
> \- José, Pescadero

Because agricultural work is dependent on the seasons, the cold winter months are particularly hard on farmworker families. “There are times when there is no work, like in December. You might earn like $1,000 a month, and then you have to pay for bills and everything else,” explains Lucía, who has been a farmworker in Pescadero for 24 years. Her extensive experience in the industry has taught her how to save for the winter months. But in recent years, inflation has increased prices and wiped out many people's modest savings.

María, a second-generation farmworker and a resident of Half Moon Bay for 32 years, laments, “Everything is very expensive in town. You go to the Mexican store or buy a bag's worth of groceries from Safeway, and one bag is $100. You can't go grocery shopping with $20 anymore because you can't buy anything.”

José struck out on his own and now rents a small plot of land in Half Moon Bay to grow his aromatic and fine herbs, but even being his own boss doesn't spare him from the cost of inflation. “It doesn't matter if they've raised the minimum wage by half of what it was. If things cost three times more than they used to, it doesn't really help.”

Agricultural work has also slowed on the Coastside, putting many farmworkers' livelihoods in jeopardy. María shares that she used to work 13 or 14 hour days, from 6:30 AM to 8:00 PM. “But since the pandemic, they've reduced our hours. Now I only work six and a half hours.” The decrease in business means several ranches are on the verge of closing or have already shut their doors.

Felipe has lived in Half Moon Bay since 1985 and has seen how drastically the area has changed. The ranch he works at almost closed but put the workers on a reduced schedule of six hours a day instead. “These months have been tough because we're not working many hours,” Felipe explains. “I'm having a hard time. It's tough because I have to pay all the bills, pay for the truck, pay insurance, and the phone bill.”

With wages and hours decreasing and costs increasing, it's becoming nearly impossible to find affordable housing on the Coastside. Victoria grew up on a farm in Oaxaca and has been a farmworker all of her life. Her family visits food banks and travels as far as Watsonville for cheaper groceries. Still, it's not enough for her to afford to move out of her employee housing: a three-bedroom trailer shared by nine people. “It's very difficult to find housing here, or if you do find it, it's extremely expensive.”

Even in Moonridge, a subsidized housing complex specifically set aside for farmworkers, the interviewees reported that they still struggle to afford to live there. Carmen, her husband, and her two younger sons have been living in the same three-bedroom house in Moonridge for 19 years. “I live in affordable housing but I don’t consider it affordable anymore. Sometimes they increase our rent by $100, sometimes $150. Before, they would go long periods without raising our rent, but now it's very consistent. It's every year now.”

Looking back on when she first moved in, Carmen says, “I remember at that time we paid about $800 for the house - now I'm paying $2,000.”

Despite living in subsidized housing, Carmen is paying the highest rent of the 22 interviewees. The person who pays the second most is José, who helps pay for a $1,900 three-bedroom unit in Moonridge that he shares with his retired parents and his brother. “When we first moved in we were paying about $607, but little by little, it’s gone up. Now we’re paying about three times more than what we started with.”

The lack of affordable rental housing leaves farmworker’s vulnerable to poor conditions and harassment, subject to retaliatory rent increases or eviction.

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> **I LIVE IN AFFORDABLE HOUSING BUT I DON’T CONSIDER IT AFFORDABLE ANYMORE.**
>
> \- Carmen, Half Moon Bay

photo credit: Susie Flores

Employee Housing

To incentivize people to take jobs that are labor-intensive and underpaid, employers sometimes offer housing to their employees for a reduced rate. For agricultural work, the housing is typically on the farm or nearby, and rent is taken out of the employee's paycheck. Interviewees who live in employee housing had an average monthly rent of $279, with the lowest rent at $80 and the highest at $700. Living close to work and with coworkers can also reduce costs for food and transportation. Although it's an affordable option, farmworkers often have to sacrifice their privacy, health, and independence when their employer is also their landlord.

Subsidized Rental Housing

Subsidized rental housing is subsidized in part or in full by the federal, state, or local government. Under California Assembly Bill 846, passed in 2024, this housing is subject to a rent cap of 5% plus the percent change of the Consumer Price Index (CPI), with a maximum annual rent increase of 10%.[7]

In the late 1990s, San Mateo County partnered with MidPen Housing to fund and build Moonridge in Half Moon Bay, which includes 79 homes that are set aside specifically for farmworkers and their families who are living at no more than 40% of the Area Median Income (AMI).[8] This means an individual can make no more than an annual salary of $52,240 or a family of four can make no more than a combined annual salary of $72,240.[9] Interviewees who live in Moonridge had an average monthly rent of $1639, with the lowest rent at $1,016 and the highest at $2,000. One interviewee lived in senior housing not set aside for farmworkers with a monthly rent of $200.

Subleased Housing

Subleasing is renting a bedroom in an apartment, house, or manufactured home that is shared with other people. In a sublease situation, there is typically at least one master tenant whose name is on the official lease. The master tenant will pay the landlord directly while the subtenants pay the master tenant. Interviewees who sublet bedrooms paid on average $1,171 a month, with the lowest rent at $700 and the highest at $1,700. Interviewees who sublet typically had around five to six housemates, but some reported previously subletting with ten or even twenty other people.

UNINHABITABLE CONDITIONS

Whether they are living in employee housing, subleased bedrooms, or storage units, tenants can face all sorts of habitability concerns. When Carmen first came to Pescadero 24 years ago, she had trouble finding housing before someone offered her a small storage room for her family by a restaurant. "We were to cook inside and use the bathroom for the toilet and showering. We stayed there for around five months while we looked for other rentals."

Many of the homes on the Coastside are older and worn down due to the sea air and fog, so repair needs are common, especially when so many people are using the facilities. Teresa is a single mother who subleases a bedroom in a three-bedroom, two-bathroom manufactured home for $700 a month for her and her son. Although the price is affordable, it comes at a cost. There is no heater in the home and the windows are broken, making it extremely cold and also "very moldy - it's blackish and appears on the walls." At one point, the tenants were also dealing with rats. "When we walked, we heard the noise below us. The other family set traps for them."

Yoana and Perla are sisters who are currently subleasing a bedroom in a manufactured home. "The room we rent is damp. The ceiling has mold. The room smells of humidity." Yoana adds, "The door is no good. The knob won't lock so we lock it with a piece of board from the inside." Although manufactured homes and RVs are more likely to have habitability issues because of their structure, tenants living in all types of housing experience habitability issues, including Araceli who lives with her husband and daughter in a bedroom in a single-family home that has a persistent mold problem.

Unfortunately, it's not just typical habitability issues like mold and pests that farmworker tenants have to deal with. In Pescadero, access to clean water is very limited. Martin, who has been working in agriculture since he was 10, lives in employee housing that lacks clean water, so he has to travel to Half Moon Bay to get it. "A machine that provides clean water would be very helpful for me. It would save a lot of effort because you work every day, and water is one of the things you spend the most money on. If you don't have water, you can't cook, since the water from the houses isn't usable for that purpose."

Héctor has been a farmworker all his life and lives in a building that was designated as farmworker housing in Pescadero. "We mostly use the water in our home for showering and washing dishes, but for cooking or drinking, we have to buy water. So I buy bottled water or I go to Half Moon Bay and fill up jugs." Spending money for clean water - on top of one's other expenses - can quickly become burdensome.

Because of Pescadero's water regulations Martin's home does not have a washing machine, so he has stockpiled clothes to avoid having to go to the laundromat so often. "Every week, you end up paying around $20 or $40 just to wash clothes, and every time you go out, you get hungry too. So you end up spending at least $120 to $130 every month."

EXTREME OVERCROWDING

In addition to habitability concerns like mold, pests, and contaminated water, Coastside farmworkers often must live in overcrowded conditions to afford to stay in the area. “If you want to live in a decent home, you have to work day and night, and all of your money goes to paying for rent,” María explains. “Renting by yourself is very difficult.” The majority of the interviewees live with five or more people, with the average household size at 5.5 people and the largest household size at nine people.

Renting a room in employee housing can be an extremely affordable option, with rent being as low as $100 a month - but it comes at a cost. When she arrived in Pescadero in 2000, Lucía found work at a farm that provided her with housing. For ten years, she would start work in the early morning and return late in the evening to a home that housed 22 other tenants. “There were nine rooms, nine couples, and two bathrooms. I really suffered living there with my children.” Maria also once lived with six roommates to afford rent. “Whenever you wanted to take a shower, the bathroom was occupied. If you wanted to go to the bathroom, you had to wait in line. Cooking was also a problem.”

In addition to waiting to use amenities, space is often limited. Héctor admits, “You can’t have many things because there’s no space. You have to stack your things on top of each other.” In overcrowded conditions, farmworkers must also endure a lack of privacy. When Victoria first moved to Pescadero, she lived in her husband’s employee housing. “It was very difficult for me because in that house, there were like five people living there, all men, and we had to live in the living room,” she explains. “They always had visitors, always. And we would be in the living room, seeing people arrive at 8, 9, or 10 PM, and they would play cards in the living room.”

Even when the amenities are well-maintained and plentiful, sharing housing can still be difficult because of the lack of autonomy. Felipe refused his boss’ offer to live in employee housing even though it was much cheaper than his current housing: “After I saw how the boss was throwing the tenants’ things around, why would I go live there?”

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> **TWO OF MY KIDS SLEEP IN THE KITCHEN AND THE OTHER TWO SLEEP WITH ME IN THE BEDROOM. BUT WE'VE NOTICED THAT MOLD IS STARTING TO SPREAD NEAR THE KITCHEN AND IT SMELLS BAD**
>
> - Evita, Half Moon Bay

Due to high costs, renting just a single bedroom is becoming increasingly common in both subsidized and unsubsidized housing. A tenant will sublease a room to individuals or families with sometimes four or five people sharing one bedroom. This can lead to poor health outcomes, such as increased stress and exposure to infectious diseases. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, farmworkers reported sleeping in their cars rather than risk infecting their families.[10]

In addition, subleasing is often not permitted in leases, making this type of housing unstable for subtenants. Although California law is interpreted to grant legal subtenants the same right to habitable housing as tenants, subtenants may simply endure poor conditions out of fear of retaliation and losing their homes. It can also negatively impact the mental health of adults and children living in the home.

Overcrowding can also lead to worse educational outcomes for children, as they lack the privacy and space to focus on their work.[11] For 12 years, Evita has been renting a bedroom in Half Moon Bay for herself and her four children in a house with four or five other people. Since they can't all fit in the room during the night, they have to get creative. "Two of my kids sleep in the kitchen and the other two sleep with me in the bedroom. But we've noticed that mold is starting to spread near the kitchen and it smells bad." Not wanting her kids to get sick, Evita wants to move somewhere else, but it's difficult for her to find a big enough place at an affordable rate, since most landlords don't want to rent to families. "I went to the laundromat and found a single room for $1,500, not including the utilities. But they didn't want kids, only wanted to rent to a couple."

photo credit: Puente de la Costa Sur

FEAR OF RETALIATION

Despite these poor conditions, many tenants we interviewed won't bring up repair needs to their landlord. The difficulties of finding an affordable, habitable rental means that tenants often endure terrible conditions for fear of retaliation in the form of rent increases, harassment, and eviction.

Because of the power their landlords hold over them, tenants are constantly having to decide between staying housed or living in healthy housing. For tenants who have distant or hostile relationships to their landlord, the likelihood of the repairs getting done is low, so they often choose to fly under the radar and not risk retaliatory behavior. Even those with neutral or good relationships with their landlords still don't want to ask for repairs in order to avoid putting their good relationship at risk and making themselves vulnerable to retaliation.

Some tenants take matters into their own hands, like María. "[My landlord] doesn't keep up with the apartment's maintenance all the time. For example, if we need a new stove, then I have to buy it. If I need a new refrigerator, I have to buy it." Some tenants will report repair needs to their landlord, but only when absolutely necessary. Héctor shares that his shower knob has been broken and the toilet needs to be replaced because it's old, but these things are still manageable. "There was a time during the rainy season when the roof started to leak, then I reported it to my supervisor and he fixed it. When the leak was in the middle of the two beds, it wasn't a big problem, but when it started dripping on me, I didn't like that".

Our findings show that tenants will often just choose to stay silent and endure the problem, like Yoana and Perla who share a moldy room with a broken door. "You think to yourself, 'Oh, what if I tell them and they get mad at me and ask me to leave?'" Perla confides. "There is nowhere to rent in Pescadero. There are some little things currently where I live that are not a big deal, but there are things that you can say have been annoying. But the landlord will say, 'If it bothers you then go look for some place better.'"

Perla's fears are not uncommon on the Coastside. After living with 22 roommates for a decade, Lucía now rents a manufactured home for $1,200 a month. Although her roof leaked for two years without repair and damaged her floor, she held back from asking for necessary repairs because she was willing to put up with the conditions in order to continue living alone. She feared her landlord would charge her for the repairs or, in the worst case, evict her. And Evita has been looking tirelessly for a new home without mold, but may not be able to find one before she gets evicted. "We've heard that the owner wants to take the house back because I think she wants to fix it up or tear it down, and that worries me. I've been thinking about what I'll do if they suddenly ask us to leave."

Without viable housing alternatives, many of the farmworker tenants we interviewed feel as if they have no choice but to endure terrible conditions.

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> **THERE IS NOWHERE TO RENT IN PESCADERO. THERE ARE SOME LITTLE THINGS CURRENTLY WHERE I LIVE THAT ARE NOT A BIG DEAL, BUT THERE ARE THINGS THAT YOU CAN SAY HAVE BEEN ANNOYING. BUT THE LANDLORD WILL SAY, ‘IF IT BOTHERS YOU THEN GO LOOK FOR SOME PLACE BETTER.**
>
> - Perla, Half Moon Bay

This feeling is even stronger for those who rent from their employer, because the tenants’ need to be compliant to their landlord is two-fold: by reporting poor conditions in either their home or their job, employee-tenants risk losing both. Uriel and Sofía are a couple who have been living in employee housing on the Coastside for the past 14 years and have a good relationship with Uriel’s employer-landlord. However, his employer-landlord is often away and the management of the farm treats the worker poorly. When Uriel was injured at work, the management refused to pay him or give him workers’ compensation. “I don't want to say anything about that, since I live here with my family,” he admits. “I can live wherever I want, but my family is here too. The management is being unjust not just to me, but to a lot of people. It's not right.”

Gabriel has lived in employee housing for the past seven years and shares the home with his wife, his brother and sister-in-law, and four nieces and nephews. He told us that his work environment is hostile, with cruel and demanding bosses. He recalls instances where his bosses yelled at the workers and ignored cases of rampant sexual harassment. He worries that this workplace dynamic might someday affect his family’s housing arrangement. “Thank God, so far there hasn't been a serious issue with them. We have stood up for ourselves when there’s been disagreements at work. But sometimes, we actually stay quiet when something in the house needs to be repaired because we worry that they'll evict us and not pay us.” Gabriel and his family make sure to keep their place tidy and try to handle any household repairs themselves to avoid attention from their employer-landlord.

Marina shares that when she used to live in Santa Cruz and commute to work in Watsonville, she didn’t have the same fear of reporting issues to her employer, since he wasn’t also her landlord. “What I feel is that one doesn't feel confident standing up to your boss, because you know that if they don't like the way you act, they can fire you and you'll be left without housing. I think everyone who lives with their boss feels the same way”. She adds, “But one tries to avoid problems with the employers and live well and stay housed. It’s very different when you have housing that isn’t yours. It’s very, very different”.

photo credit: Puente de la Costa Sur

FEAR OF ACCIDENTS AND UNEMPLOYMENT

Farmworkers feel they have no choice other than to weather the storm to avoid losing their housing, but for many, the ability to keep their housing may not be within their control. Carmen laments, "Housing is very expensive. When we can no longer work, what are we going to do? How will we afford such high costs?"

Lorena previously worked at a nursery where she started with plant cultivation and inventory before being promoted to managing interior and exterior plant decor for the nursery's major clients. Unfortunately, an accident at work left her with difficulty walking and standing for extended periods, so she had to leave her job. She receives workers' compensation but struggles with the little income she receives. "At first, I was making $13,000 a year. Later, I earned $40,000 and some change. But now, I receive $12,000. All of it goes to rent. Everything. Because of the water, the electricity, and all the bills."

Like Lorena, many farmworkers will have an accident or disability that eventually prevents them from working. Even before her accident, Lorena had arthritis in her fingers from years of planting. "Yesterday I made potatoes, but I used to always make soups, salads, meats like steak or shrimp, and some fruit. And now, no. It frustrates me."

Although some farmworkers may have support to get them through tough times, it can put significant additional stress on those providing the support. María supports her husband who worked in the agricultural sector until he fell ill. "My husband has not worked for five years since he had surgery. But I work, so my priority is the rent. I work to pay the rent, [and] my daughter also helps me pay rent."

Likewise, José's parents have struggled with their retirement and need his support to stay housed, which makes him concerned for the future. "I worry about everything. I worry about stopping work or generating less. I also worry about the possibility of losing my apartment because everything is interconnected." Although farmworkers' paychecks are deducted for Social Security, those without legal immigration status will never be able to access those funds. This makes it even more difficult for farmworkers to imagine the possibility of retirement.

For Uriel and Sofía, the reality of losing their home feels very tangible, particularly under their farm's poor management. "If you get hurt and don't work for a week they say they won't pay you, even though you got hurt at work," Sofía shares. "Uriel hurt his knee and reported it to the doctor. The doctor stopped him from working but the company told him they weren't going to pay him." Uriel returned to work, but Sofía also had an accident and hasn't worked since. "The truth is right now it's hard to afford everything because I'm not working," Sofía admits. "Our daughter is studying so she only works two days. There's also our kids' expenses, so it's difficult to buy food, pay the bills, and still pay the rent because Uriel doesn't earn enough." Plus, they have to worry about whether or not they'll be able to stay housed after Uriel retires because they live in employee housing. Sofía says, "We'll have to leave because other coworkers have stayed because their sons continue to work here. But my daughter doesn't want to work here, she wants to study. And my son doesn't want to work here either because he sees how hard the work is and how they pay."

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> **I WORRY ABOUT EVERYTHING.**
> **I WORRY ABOUT STOPPING WORK OR GENERATING LESS.**
> **I ALSO WORRY ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF LOSING MY APARTMENT BECAUSE EVERYTHING IS INTERCONNECTED.**
>
> \- José, Half Moon Bay

photo credit: Puente de la Costa Sur

photo credit: Susie Flores

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN AND CHILDREN

Although refusing to rent to someone based on their sex or familial status is illegal under the Fair Housing Act, interviewees report that most landlords don't want to rent to families with children, especially single mothers.

According to Teresa, landlords prefer tenants "not to have many children, not to have pets, and mind the noise too." Evita agrees, saying that most listings she's seen are only for one or two people, and if they accept children at all, usually they are only okay with one. Single men or men who migrate without their families can rent in employee housing more easily than single women or families.

Teresa shares, "My former housemate's boyfriend also worked in the fields, and because he's a man they would let him rent a place at work. He paid $200 or $300 a month, but lived in a room with eight or ten people. I asked the boss [if I could rent there], but he told me that because I'm a woman he couldn't provide a place for me to live due to safety concerns for me and my child. That's why he prefers to hire only men."

Families also have to worry about additional costs for child care. According to the San Mateo County Commission on the Status of Women, there is a severe shortage of both child care educators and child care spaces in San Mateo County. This results in many women taking on child care responsibilities in addition to - or instead of - their jobs.[12] Due to the lack of family benefits and a viable social safety net, caregivers experience higher burden and distress, with nearly 1/3 of women in San Mateo County reporting difficulty paying for expenses.[13]

These constraints also make it difficult for couples to start or grow their family. "I would like to have another baby," Araceli says. "But where I live it's not possible." Taking maternity leave exacerbates families' struggles to make ends meet. When her third child was born, Victoria had to stop working, but when she was ready to return she received terrible news. "This previous winter, they laid off some of us. I've already done the math for the time that I haven't worked: it's been a year and a month."

photo credit: Puente de la Costa Sur

Similarly, Marina used to contribute to the family's income, but she isn't working right now in order to care for her children: a seven-year-old, a six-year-old, a two-year-old, and a ten-month-old. Even after her maternity leave ended, some of her children are dealing with health issues, making it difficult for Marina to leave them alone. "I'm thinking about going back to work if everything goes well with my children. If my children's physical condition improves, I can work while they're at school. But if they need a lot of my attention, I won't be able to work." The loss of Marina's income has been hard for the family. "Sometimes we manage, but with all the expenses, the money is tight... since only my husband works and has to pay for insurance and other expenses. He handles everything."

For Araceli, Victoria, and Marina, they are able to support themselves and their children with the help of their husbands, but single mothers do not have that safety net. Landlords do not want to rent to single mothers, which severely limits their housing options and leaves both the mothers and their children more vulnerable than their peers. As this report has shown, many single mothers end up living in severely overcrowded or dilapidated conditions.

Juana is a single mother who lost her home in the aftermath of the 2023 shooting and has since struggled to find affordable housing. "It is always very difficult to find a place to rent when you have children. Sometimes [lessors] will only offer you very expensive rooms or tell you 'No' because there are too many people." Now, Juana lives in a shelter with her three children, hoping that the situation is only temporary. "There should be more housing support for single mothers who need it," she says. "I think it would be beneficial to provide single mothers with a little bit more help."

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>
> **THERE SHOULD BE MORE HOUSING SUPPORT FOR SINGLE MOTHERS WHO NEED IT**
>
> – Juana, Pescadero

MIGRATION DEBT

In addition to daily costs, many farmworkers also have to pay off migration debt for themselves or family members. Sisters Yoana and Perla paid $11,500 each to cross the border, but they were detained by border patrol twice and after a third time, settled in Pescadero. Victoria migrated to the Coastside to meet up with her husband without her two children and is struggling to raise funds to bring them over. The couple still have their own debts from crossing the border - which originally totaled $25,000 - that they are still working to pay off, even while Victoria is on maternity leave for her third child. "If I were to bring [my children] here, it would cost me between $16,000 and $17,000. That's because they're still small. When they're older, it costs $13,000 each. That's why I get very anxious when I think about it. I don't have a job and I'm in debt, but I still want to bring my children here. It's a desperation that's hard to explain."

Saving up that amount of money on farmworker wages while paying for basic necessities is a long and arduous task. It took Araceli and her husband a year and a half to save $30,000 to pay off Araceli's migration debt and to save enough money so that they could afford to bring their daughter north as well. And even if they manage to pay off all their debt, deportation is always a looming fear for those without U.S. citizenship status. "One suffers a lot when you come over as an undocumented immigrant," Martin admits. "Tomorrow, immigration might come and take you away. I've seen a lot of videos."

INCREASED DISPLACEMENT

Due to all of these factors, farmworkers are being displaced at alarming rates. Meanwhile, the population of the Coastside is changing. "There used to be a lot more people here," Martin says. "I remember when I arrived in '85 there were a lot of people. Now there aren't. A lot of people have moved to Modesto and Madera where it's cheaper and bought houses." María has observed that it's particularly difficult on the younger generation of farmworkers. "[Many] older people continue to live here, but younger people are moving to other places because of the cost of living. People have moved to Modesto, Stockton, Sacramento, and Oregon because the housing there is more affordable... My colleague lived in San Mateo and moved to Oakland, then he moved to Oregon because he found a house just like the one he was renting in Oakland but rent was less than $1,000."

In the face of this displacement, farmworkers express their concern for the future and their hope to stay on the Coastside. Despite all of the challenges and the fact that she's far from her children, Victoria still says, "I've gotten used to being here and I can't imagine it any other way. I came, started working, and I've really gotten used to it, even though there are struggles. If I have the opportunity to continue living here, I'd like to keep working here."

Lucía watched her colleagues be pushed out due to the high cost of living and she worries that she'll have to leave Pescadero when she retires. "My whole life is here. I've been here for 24 years, and I would feel bad leaving to move somewhere else. I would like it if, God willing, there was more housing in Pescadero."

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MY WHOLE LIFE IS HERE. I'VE BEEN HERE FOR 24 YEARS, AND I WOULD FEEL BAD LEAVING TO MOVE SOMEWHERE ELSE. I WOULD LIKE IT IF, GOD WILLING, THERE WAS MORE HOUSING IN PESCADERO.

- Lucía, Pescadero

"WHO IS RESPONSIBLE"?

A Brief History of Farmworker Exclusionary Policy

Hyun-mi Kim

> "Blacks and Chicanos are disproportionately represented among migrant workers primarily because American society is fundamentally racist - because migrancy is the worst kind of work and hence the only kind available to many people of color. [P]eople who are forced to travel as migrants are seen in the communities in which they work as "different" - the commonly accepted euphemism for dirty, diseased, immoral, and generally unwanted."[14]
>
> - Shirley Chisholm

More than a half century ago, the Subcommittee on Migratory Labor of the 91st US Congress' Committee on Labor and Public Welfare held eighteen separate hearings on "Migrant and Seasonal Farmworker Powerlessness." These hearings were the first congressional attempt to scrutinize rampant labor exploitation, pesticide poisoning, substandard farm labor housing, and anti-Mexican racism that migrant farmworkers and their children were pervasively subjected to by the U. S. Agricultural industry. Entitled "Who Is Responsible?," the last two hearings were specifically dedicated to accountability, or the lack thereof. These sessions highlighted the systematic failure of political authorities to stop agricultural employers' abuse of farmworkers, including physical retaliation against the workers who supported or joined the farmworker trade union movement, largely led by the United Farm Workers (UFW).

It was in these final two hearings that Congresswoman Shirely Chisholm – soon to be the first Black woman to campaign for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination – delivered a scathing analysis. She drew the historical parallel between Black workers' struggle against labor exploitation by white landowners, and migrant Latino farmworkers' struggles for fair wages, dignified working conditions, and the right to unionize in an industry still dominated by white growers.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the majority of farmworkers and domestic workers were Black men and women. In the 1930s, Congress purposefully excluded farmworkers and domestic workers from groundbreaking legislation protecting workers' rights and providing a federal safety net for the elderly, unemployed, and the poor: the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), the Social Security Act (SSA), and the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA).[15] To this day, both occupations – although recently deemed "essential workers" – still remain entirely excluded from the protections of the NLRA, and farmworkers remain fully excluded from the FLSA's overtime protections.

Today, the intense anti-immigrant agenda of the current Trump administration resembles the ugly history of "Operation Wetback:" a 1954 policy that deployed racial profiling to deport nearly 1.3 million Mexican workers, many of them citizens.[16]

Farmworkers' long-running struggles for labor, housing, and civil rights help contextualize the current fight for affordable housing by Asian, Indigenous, Mexican, and Latino farmworkers in San Mateo County's coastal rural communities. Following the horrific 2023 shooting deaths of seven farmworkers in Half Moon Bay, the County established a Farmworker Housing Compliance Task Force to inspect farmworker housing and evaluate whether "essential health and safety standards are being met." However, many critical questions remain unanswered.

For example, HSC code 17060.2 requires operators of employee housing to provide all residents with "a written copy in English and Spanish of every order or notice of violation issued by an enforcement agency, accompanied by an explanation of the owner's anticipated response."[17] However, the Task Force takes the position that they are not an "enforcement agency," and thus farmworkers who live in employee housing that were issued a notice of corrective actions are not entitled to receive a notice. Instead, the County requires farmworkers – who are mostly monolingual Spanish speakers lacking digital navigation skills – to file for public records to obtain the inspection report of their own living quarters and learn what their employer/landlord needs to do to make the home habitable. This is a classic example of the preservation of injustice resulting from government red tape and questionable statutory interpretation.

Effective and meaningful reforms are possible only when the impacted members of marginalized communities who bear the consequences of exclusionary policies have a seat at the decision-making table. Bryan Stevenson of Equal Justice Initiatives reminds us of "the power of proximity," that it is in proximity to those suffering that "we will see things we won't otherwise see." Farmworkers should not be drowned out by policy enthusiasts and legislators. The latest farmworker housing projects in Half Moon Bay would not have been possible without the advocacy of farmworkers and their supporters whose grassroots activism generated public attention. Farmworkers continue to demand accountability from public officials for socioeconomic and racial inequities, and it is our collective responsibility to support their efforts.

Hyun-mi Kim, Esq. *is a public interest attorney for the Housing Program at Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto* and a former Director of Community Engagement and Public Policy at Puente de La Costa Sur*. Perspectives shared are solely those of the author.*

**Identification purpose only.*

SECTION 2:
A FRAMEWORK FOR ACHIEVING FARMWORKER HOUSING WITH DIGNITY

photo credit: Puente de la Costa Sur

Farmworkers often live in housing situations that are excluded from existing tenant protection laws, and the laws that do exist are often poorly enforced. This section details recommendations for how government officials, policymakers, and philanthropic funders can work together with farmworkers to craft policies for housing with dignity that take into consideration farmworkers' unique circumstances.

SUPPORT FARMWORKER ORGANIZING

Organizing, outreach, and education can help farmworkers realize the existing rights that they do have under current law. Farmworker unions and tenant committees have had great success improving the workers' housing and job site conditions. The United Farm Workers (UFW) have achieved a long list of historic wins, from mandating rest periods and overtime pay to outlawing DDT and other dangerous pesticides.[18] For 35 years, the Center for Community Advocacy (CCA) has been helping farmworkers in Monterey County and Santa Cruz County establish tenant committees and negotiate with landlords for better conditions.[19] For example, in 2024, one of CCA's tenant committees, the Greenfield Comité, won renovations for the tenants' substandard apartment building.[20] In supporting farmworker organizing, these organizations have helped farmworkers achieve safer working and housing conditions.

On the Coastside, Del Campo al Cambio (DCAC) is a community empowerment and leadership project organized by current and former farmworkers through Puente de la Costa Sur's Community Engagement and Public Policy Program. Since 2022, DCAC participants have been supported by Puente with training, resources, and organizing tools to create the change they want to see in their communities. After decades of living in Pescadero, Lucía holds a deep appreciation for Puente's organizing and educational workshops. "Back then there wasn't support like there is now, where if something serious happens, you can say 'Look, this is happening to me,' and you actually get help. Before it wasn't like that. There wasn't all this help like there is now.

Through Del Campo al Cambio's organizing, farmworkers have been able to bring the community together to mobilize for better conditions. In 2023, DCAC organized farmworkers to speak in front of the California Coastal Commision in an effort to bring safe drinking water to Pescadero's Middle High School, which has been without it for more than a decade. Since the Coastal Commission's approval of the project, DCAC has continued to advocate to ensure its implementation. They have also organized to secure a commitment in the San Mateo County Housing Element to further fair housing for farmworkers in unincorporated areas.

Nicolás has lived in high-quality employee housing for 12 years and strongly recommends that other farm workers attend DCAC's organizing meetings. "Puente gives us valuable information each time we meet. They are our link to stay informed on many topics. So I would ask the community to join us, to come and get informed, to come and fill themselves with this information." One of Nicolás' previous employers listened to his workers when they came together to report on their conditions. "My former boss put his heart and soul into making our housing better and put in vinyl flooring. Because we insisted, he put in air conditioning, he put in potable water - we put pressure on him and it worked."

Although people may think they don't have the same ability to collectively advocate or access enforcement options to ensure that the landlord makes repairs, Nicolás believes people need to be confident in their collective power as farmworkers to improve housing conditions. "If the ranchers want to, they can make their workers' living conditions better. Their workers can feel comfortable and they'll go to work comfortably. But it's bad when they keep you - I hate to say it - like a little animal. There you work and there you're going to stay. Not anymore - things have to change going forward."

However, in recent years, organizing representatives have increasingly struggled to speak with farmworkers. In 2020, California passed a regulation that mandated that agricultural employers allow union organizers onto their property for up to three hours per day, 120 days per year. But not long after, UFW organizers attempting to gain access to two California farms - Cedar Point Nursery and Fowler Packing Company - were turned away and the farms filed a lawsuit. In 2021, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Cedar Point Nursery v. Hassid* that California's regulation was a "per se physical taking," and therefore an unconstitutional violation of the property rights of the employers.[21]

After this ruling, agricultural employers are emboldened to limit access to their property by any organization's representatives who are trying to inform farmworkers of their rights or teach them valuable organizing skills. Though reaching farmworkers at their place of employment has become more difficult, we have identified a number of strategic opportunities to support farmworker organizing efforts.

Provide Resources

Philanthropic funders can strengthen new and existing farmworker tenants' organizing efforts by financially supporting their work, providing spaces for them to gather, and lowering barriers to access resources.

For example, Common Counsel Foundation has worked with a dozen other funders to facilitate the Fund for an Inclusive California. This is a collaborative funding initiative co-designed with grassroots leaders that directly funds tenant organizing and tenant unions.[22] Community organizers not only receive the funds, but they also have decision-making power and help determine funding priorities. Due to this funding, community organizers in the Inland Empire were able to grow their member bases, strengthen the quality of their trainings, craft and pass effective tenant protection policies and improve their ability to respond to urgent tenant needs.[23] And this dedication to funding tenant organizing is spreading nationwide, thanks to other pooled funds like HouseUS, which funds tenant power at all levels from local tenant unions to federal campaigns.[24]

But this is not the only way to support tenant organizers. The Silicon Valley Community Foundation provides conference rooms free of charge to nonprofit organizations, including one in Pescadero.[25] The San Francisco Foundation's Rapid Response Fund for Movement Building provides one-time grants to grassroots organizations to meet the needs of low-income communities of color facing unexpected, urgent events.[26] The quick and continuous nature of this fund lowers barriers to philanthropy and is crucial for organizers' ability to tackle unforeseen challenges.

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> **IF THE RANCHERS WANT TO, THEY CAN MAKE THEIR WORKERS' LIVING CONDITIONS BETTER. THEIR WORKERS CAN FEEL COMFORTABLE AND THEY'LL GO TO WORK COMFORTABLY. BUT IT'S BAD WHEN THEY KEEP YOU - I HATE TO SAY IT - LIKE A LITTLE ANIMAL. THERE YOU WORK AND THERE YOU'RE GOING TO STAY. NOT ANYMORE - THINGS HAVE TO CHANGE GOING FORWARD.**
>
> – Nicolás, Pescadero

photo credit: Puente de la Costa Sur

Pass the Tenant Right to Organize

Public officials in San Mateo County could support farmworker tenants by passing a Tenant Right To Organize policy, like the San Francisco Union-At-Home Ordinance[27] or Measure BB, the Berkeley Tenant Protection and Right to Organize Act.[28] Each one "codifies a framework for collective bargaining between tenant associations and landlords, and classifies all organizing rights as an essential housing service."[29]

In San Francisco, the Veritas Tenants Association (VTA), made up of tenants from over 100 Veritas-owned buildings in the city, leveraged the Union-At-Home Ordinance to enter into direct contract negotiations with their corporate landlord to discuss issues such as rent increases, habitability, and tenant debt.[30] The continued organizing of VTA tenants living at 320 14th Street in San Francisco's Mission District resulted in the acquisition of the building by San Francisco Community Land Trust, preserving the building as permanently affordable housing while also putting the residents on the pathway to limited equity cooperative homeownership.[31]

A Tenant Right to Organize policy in San Mateo County should include language that explicitly covers farmworker tenants living in employee housing and farmworker subsidized housing, so that all farmworkers have equal access to the right. This is a crucial part of leveling the playing field between employer-landlords and employee-tenants.

"We can't continue to go on like this," says Nicolás. "If we are all together, we'll move forward better and faster. We have a strong voice as a team." By formally establishing their right to organize, the County can help protect farmworker tenant organizers from landlord retaliation and support the development of future farmworker tenant leaders.

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> **WE CAN'T CONTINUE TO GO ON LIKE THIS…IF WE ARE ALL TOGETHER, WE'LL MOVE FORWARD BETTER AND FASTER. WE HAVE A STRONG VOICE AS A TEAM.**
> - Nicolás, Pescadero

photo credit: Puente de la Costa Sur

IMPLEMENT TENANT PROTECTIONS TAILORED TO FARMWORKERS

Supporting farmworker tenants' leadership development and organizing can lead to both material changes to farmworker housing conditions, as well as bipartisan support for effective tenant protections. For example, in 2024, CCA's tenant committees were instrumental in Salinas City Council's unanimous passage of local rent stabilization, just cause for eviction, and tenant anti-harassment ordinances, filling up city council chambers to capacity for months to share their experiences.[32] The policies Salinas passed were also tailored to address farmworkers' specific concerns.

Expand Protections for Vulnerable Populations

Tenant protections such as the right to return, just cause for eviction, and anti-harassment policies, are powerful ways to keep tenants housed - but they must be adopted expansively to ensure everyone is equally protected. Farmworkers are already a marginalized population, but farmworker families, single mothers, seniors, and people with disabilities are even more at risk of housing instability. Therefore, San Mateo County should consider adopting tenant protections that provide extra support to these vulnerable populations. There are numerous Bay Area precedents for this type of additional support.

For example, Oakland[33] and San Francisco[34] prohibit "no-fault" evictions during the school year for educators and families with children. In San Francisco, seniors and people with disabilities who have lived in their homes for a decade are protected against "no-fault" evictions.[35] Salinas' Just Cause ordinance prohibits landlords from evicting tenants if family members moved into the home.[36]

Tenant protections should also extend to all types of housing and tenancies. For example, Salinas' three new tenant protection ordinances extend to all types of rental units, including single-family homes, condominiums, and manufactured homes.[37] In addition, since so many farmworkers live in subsidized or employee housing, the County should ensure that future tenant protection ordinances explicitly cover these types of housing as well.

Tenant protections should also explicitly include subtenants and sublessees, since subtenancies among farmworkers are on the rise, as highlighted in Section 1. Although subtenants have the same rights as master tenants under California law, in practice, many reported difficulty enforcing these rights due to fear of retaliation or the added challenges of establishing rights under an informal subtenant agreement. This is why it was critical that all of Salinas' tenant protection ordinances included subtenants and sublessees in the definition of "tenant,"[38] unlike California law which does not affirmatively protect subtenants or sublessees.[39] This is the type of important nuance only possible when farmworkers themselves are involved in the creation of tenant protections.

Lower the Rent Burden for Farmworkers

As described in Section 1, one challenge farmworkers face is variable income due to seasonal work, which makes it difficult to make rent payments during low season, especially for those with dependents. Tenant protections such as a lower rent cap and seasonal rental assistance would help farmworkers get through these difficult months and build up critical savings.

Lower Rent Cap

Although there is a statewide rent cap of 5% plus the Consumer Price Index (CPI), with a maximum increase of 10%, this cap is still too high for farmworkers who are already enduring low wages. While much needs to be done at the state level to cover single-family homes and manufactured homes under the rent cap, as well as lower it to meet the needs of renters, local public officials can also help reduce farmworkers' rent burden.

The County should establish a lower rent cap, at most 3%, so that farmworkers are not forced to sublease rooms in order to stay housed. Salinas' local rent stabilization ordinance passed in 2024 capped rent increases at 2.75% or 75% of the last 12-month increase, whichever is less.[40]

It is also critical that the County ensure a lower rent cap applies to subsidized housing set aside for farmworkers - like Moonridge - to avoid these workers being priced out of the housing created and designated for them. It is not enough to simply set aside subsidized housing for farmworkers if rents are outpacing farmworker wages. By lowering the rent cap, the County helps farmworkers lower the percentage of their income that they have to set aside for rent and also makes it possible for them to build up nest eggs or rainy day funds.

Farmworker Rental Assistance Fund

A Farmworker Rental Assistance Fund that can provide tenants with at least three months of rental assistance would also help farmworkers build up savings and prevent displacement. The County already provides rental assistance through its core agencies, but due to a lack of funding and strict eligibility requirements, many tenants struggle to access these resources. Farmworkers need a consistent source of assistance to stay housed during the harsh winter months, so it is important that enough funding is set aside to supplement farmworkers' lower income while also decreasing the barriers to applying. For example, not requiring a Social Security Number can help undocumented workers apply. If the County adopts a lower rent cap in conjunction with a rental assistance program, it will also increase the impact of the program in the long term.

photo credit: Puente de la Costa Sur

ADOPT A COUNTYWIDE PROACTIVE RENTAL INSPECTION AND LICENSING PROCESS

In addition to establishing stronger tenant protections, the County should also shift its Farm Labor Housing Compliance and general Code Compliance procedures for rental housing to Proactive Rental Inspection and Licensing (PRIL).

Proactive Rental Inspection and Licensing (PRIL): Local governments proactively and regularly inspect all rental properties - with a focus on interior conditions - and require landlords to obtain a license from the local government to engage in the business of renting out their properties. If a landlord fails to allow the local government to inspect their property or to maintain their property in compliance with local codes, the local government can revoke the license for noncompliance, preventing the landlord from renting the property.[41]

Adopting PRIL is now easier than ever with clearer guidelines and detailed case studies, resulting in more and more local jurisdictions implementing these policies to stabilize neighborhoods and protect community health and safety.[42]

In the wake of tragedies in Pescadero[43] and Half Moon Bay,[44] San Mateo County organized a Farmworker Housing Task Force to evaluate employee housing in unincorporated areas to determine whether or not "minimum habitability standards were met."[45] After inspections were complete, the Task Force released a report in February 2025 summarizing its findings. After reviewing both the report and the inspections records, we developed the following recommendations on how the County can improve inspections by applying PRIL to both its Farm Labor Housing Compliance and Code Compliance:

Increase Proactive and Consistent Communication with Tenants

After living in employee housing in Pescadero for nearly a decade, Gabriel has been disappointed with local efforts to improve the working and housing conditions of farmworkers. When County inspectors conduct water quality or housing inspections, Gabriel says they only interact with the employers, and therefore only hear one side of the story. He wishes someone from the County would meet directly with farmworkers to understand their experiences and work with them to shape strong enforcement policies to address poor conditions. "In all of the years that I've worked there, there's never been inspectors that come to speak with the workers to ask how we're being treated."

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> **IN ALL OF THE YEARS THAT I'VE WORKED THERE, THERE'S NEVER BEEN INSPECTORS THAT COME TO SPEAK WITH THE WORKERS TO ASK HOW WE'RE BEING TREATED.**
>
> - Gabriel, Pescadero

Our review of County records was consistent with Gabriel's statement and showed that there was no system to document or track conversations with employee-tenants during the inspections. The County did hold community meetings with farmworkers and provided ways for tenants to make confidential reports on their conditions, but this puts the onus on the tenants to make a report, and unfortunately - as outlined above in Section 1 - many tenants fear reporting poor conditions for fear of retaliation and eviction.[46] The County also did not clarify in its final report how it would make its reporting mechanisms accessible to tenants who need documents translated, or those who do not have access to computers or personal vehicles to submit forms.

Communication with tenants should not serve as merely a reporting mechanism, but be a continuous dialogue for policy development. That is what PRIL does: it shifts the responsibility to maintain healthy, safe housing to landlords and local governments. When it is no longer solely the tenants' responsibility to ensure their home remains habitable, it helps decrease the power imbalance between tenants and landlords.

Proper communication with farmworker tenants also has the added benefit of preventing fraudulent behavior. According to Francisco Ocampo, who currently runs the U.S. Department of Labor's San Jose office, "growers and labor contractors will sometimes house workers in a different location than the one they list on their H2A application, or allow conditions to deteriorate after the housing department conducts inspections."[47] There have been documented incidents in California of farm operators moving employees to other housing during inspections and then moving the employees back to unsafe units after the inspection is over.[48]

Documenting conversations with employee-tenants to confirm their current residence would have been critical to the accuracy of the Task Force inspections. Its Final Report found that 32 units were vacant at the time of inspection and therefore did not indicate whether corrective action was required, nor did it explain how it confirmed whether those units were vacant year-round.

Rather than having informal conversations or waiting for reports from tenants, the County should make an effort to conduct one-on-one conversations with employee-tenants with guided questions and document their responses. This would help the Task Force proactively confirm the number of employees, occupied units, and desired repairs. This process can also create meaningful opportunities for tenants to share their input on the effectiveness of the inspection process and enforcement mechanisms.

Gabriel strongly believes that County inspectors should engage with farmworkers if they hope to create real change. "I think the only thing that would help is if someone [from the County] actually came and talked to the farmworkers when the boss isn't watching over us," he says. "They should speak with the workers because it's not the same as only speaking with the boss. For me, that would be the best thing they could do. I think it would change many things."

Enact Clear and Effective Accountability Measures

Establishing clear and effective accountability measures developed with farmworkers' input is necessary to ensure effective code compliance.

The first step is developing a Countywide rental registry, which the County has already started by collecting data on employee housing units. After the development of the rental registry, the County can then monitor property conditions and even revoke permits for noncompliance without relying on tenant complaints. The County can use PRIL's four steps to ensure compliance: 1) Describe the activities or conditions that are in violation of specific sections of municipal code and identify what those sections of code are; 2) List actions necessary to correct the violation/s; 3) Set out the deadline or specific date by which to correct the violation/s; and 4) Explain the consequences of continued noncompliance.[50]

Although the County's Farmworker Task Force inspections followed steps 1 - 3, the County was not clear about the accountability measures they would take to ensure that bad actors corrected their violations. In the report, the Task Force noted that 50 farmworker housing units did not meet minimum health and safety standards.[51] Our own review of the County's records indicate that inspectors documented various issues such as wood rot, mold, pests, contaminated water, exposed wiring, and more. Although the Task Force provided the operators of those units with written documentation of the specific findings and necessary corrections, as well as a timeline for the corrections to be made, the report made no indication of how operators would be held accountable to follow through on the corrections.[52] For example, one inspection report at a farm in Pescadero revealed that a family of three was living in a trailer that had a waste line discharging human waste directly to the surface, in violation of the law. The inspector recommended the farm install a septic holding tank, but the solution was listed as only temporary and did not explain what measure the County was going to take to ensure the correction happened.

> "I THINK THE ONLY THING THAT WOULD HELP IS IF SOMEONE [FROM THE COUNTY] ACTUALLY CAME AND TALKED TO THE FARMWORKERS WHEN THE BOSS ISN'T WATCHING OVER US"
>
> - Gabriel, Pescadero

Cooperative Compliance Measures

Punitive methods are not always necessary to ensure compliance. Many local governments have had great success in adopting programs that help property owners achieve compliance, such as rental rehabilitation assistance programs or providing free and discounted home repair services and supplies.[53] One such program is the city-funded Housing Program Support Fund in Seattle, Washington, which provides grants or low-interest loans to property owners to "assist them in placing low-income rental units in habitable condition."[54] These loans or grants can also be contingent on affordability restrictions or tenant protections, like Pennsylvania's Whole Home Repair Program.[55] Governments can also design fee structures to award good actors with reduced municipal fees, like in Utah where several municipalities award annual rebates on the disproportionate impact fee to good actors.[56]

Punitive Compliance Measures

However, when bad actors continue to neglect compliance actions, punitive measures should be taken. Examples of punitive measures include financial penalties and injunctions, and adopting PRIL provides localities with the opportunity to establish other enforcement mechanisms.[57] Because PRIL requires landlords to have a license in order to rent out their properties, suspending or revoking that license is an effective enforcement mechanism. The loss of that license can also lead to further measures, such as rent escrow programs or eviction prohibitions. Rent escrow programs, like in Detroit, permit tenants to pay their rent into a municipally-held account if their landlord fails to obtain a Certificate of Compliance. The landlord has three months to reach compliance and retain the rent, but if the landlord fails to do so the tenant gets to keep the rent for relocation purposes.[58] In Seattle, unlicensed or unregistered property owners are prohibited from evicting tenants.[59]

Adopting PRIL in general Code Compliance procedures may take time, but since farmworker employee housing has a permitting process, the County already has the groundwork it needs to establish PRIL in its Farm Labor Housing Compliance program. Just as PRIL requires landlords to have a license to rent out a building, the Employee Housing Act also requires farm operators to have a permit before using a structure as employee housing.[60]

However, after the Task Force completed its inspections, it did not require farm operators to obtain permits for units farmworkers were currently occupying, as long as the operators implemented the County's recommendations.[61] Instead, the report states that the operators were "encouraged to obtain necessary permits to legalize all units and were provided referrals to County Planning and Building and Environmental Health Services staff available to assist with the permitting process."[62] And, as stated above, the County did not establish how it would hold operators accountable to these standards. By allowing farm operators to rent out unpermitted units, the County loses one of the strongest enforcement mechanisms it has to ensure healthy and habitable homes for farmworkers.

The County claims it permits operators to voluntarily address compliance issues to prevent the displacement of tenants, but it only further normalizes the poor conditions of employee housing. It is far more effective to enforce habitability compliance while creating and funding safety nets for tenants to prevent their displacement.

Provide Safety Nets to Prevent Tenant Displacement Due to Poor Conditions

Instead of exempting property owners from permitting their units, there are proven ways to prevent displacement that protect residents from poor conditions, including relocation assistance and prohibiting the pass-through of repair costs.

Tenants are likely to endure terrible conditions if there are no safety nets in place to help them relocate. Marina shares, "The boss said that [the County inspectors] were going to inspect our home but they haven't come yet. But we were afraid they were going to take the housing away from us."

To prevent this, the County could directly distribute relocation assistance to farmworkers who are displaced through a yellow or red tag. In Minneapolis, landlords are required to pay displaced tenants the equivalent of three months' rent, and if they don't, the City pays the tenants and recoups the cost through the landlord's property tax bill.[63]

The County should also clearly state that landlords will bear the cost of repairs, relocation, or program fees to prevent them from passing costs on to their tenants. In Los Angeles, landlords are capped at recouping 50 percent of proactive rental inspection program fees from tenants and must charge it as a prorated monthly fee.[64] The pass-through of repair costs can also be limited through local rent control ordinances: for example, San Francisco requires landlords to recoup repair costs over the span of several years.[65]

Lastly, if the existing owner decides to step away, local governments can step in and help the tenants acquire their homes. In Cincinnati, funds from the American Rescue Plan Act were used to help purchase 194 properties that were then resold to existing tenants and other local owners.[66]

photo credit: Amanda Chang

ADVANCE COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP MODELS TO PROMOTE PERMANENTLY AFFORDABLE AND DIGNIFIED FARMWORKER HOUSING

Although adopting strong tenant protections and strengthening the inspection process are critical for families, farmworkers in San Mateo County need more housing options that are permanently and deeply affordable. Subsidized housing like Moonridge is becoming increasingly unaffordable for farmworkers, especially those living on a fixed income. They need options with clear parameters on allowable increases that are not reliant on their employment status or the Area Median Income (AMI).

Farmworkers dream of being able to live in safe and affordable housing without the looming fear of losing their job. "Dignity would mean not being tied to an employer," says Gabriel. "I believe it's no longer dignifying to be bound to a boss, as it limits what you can do."

"For me a dignified home would be housing that is your own." Uriel says. "And for me," Sofía adds. "Dignified housing is where you feel comfortable and safe. Where you feel that you have rights. Where they won't neglect your needs... I would like if some day there is an opportunity, we can move somewhere else. So as not to be, like, enslaved here." Uncoupling the deep links between employment and housing by creating opportunities for farmworkers' collective ownership would generate more permanently safe, healthy, and affordable housing.

The County and funders should take steps to pass policies and provide funding for community-controlled housing solutions, like housing cooperatives and community land trusts (CLTs).[67] Owned by the people who live there, with key decisions made collaboratively, these forms of collective ownership provide long-term stability, reaffirm farmworkers' agency, and promote robust wellbeing.

Community Land Trust (CLT): A community-led organization created to acquire land and housing from the speculative market to make it permanently affordable for low-income communities for generations to come. A CLT property is democratically controlled by residents and can be put to a wide variety of uses, including homeownership, rental and cooperative housing, food production through community gardens, commercial space, and more.[68]

photo credit: Puente de la Costa Sur

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> **DIGNITY WOULD MEAN NOT BEING TIED TO AN EMPLOYER… I BELIEVE IT'S NO LONGER DIGNIFYING TO BE BOUND TO A BOSS, AS IT LIMITS WHAT YOU CAN DO.**
>
> - Gabriel, Pescadero

Farmworker community-controlled housing solutions are possible and well-established in California. In Soledad, Santa Elena is a farmworker housing cooperative that has been a thriving community for decades. In the 1970s, farmworkers moved to what was originally known as the Pinnacles Mobile Home Park in hopes of finding better living conditions than the labor camps.[69] However, residents soon discovered that conditions were the same if not worse, with frequent flooding, lack of basic amenities, and consistent rent increases. After a successful lawsuit against the park in 1978, community organizers helped the residents form a cooperative and buy it in 1981. Since then, residents have diligently stewarded Santa Elena to preserve its community and affordability for generations to come.

Similarly, in Bolinas, the farmworker residents of Tacherra Ranch endured horrific housing conditions for many years before organizing together to improve their circumstances. Initially grateful to be living in an affordable home on the farm, residents began to receive steep rent increases, despite the fact that they were living with black mold, falling structures, contaminated grounds, and rats. Conditions got so bad that Marin County red-tagged the employee housing at Tacherra Ranch in 2022, but as a result the residents had nowhere to go.[70] To prevent displacement, especially for the ranch's undocumented residents, the residents banded together to find a solution.

After tireless resident organizing, Bolinas Community Land Trust (Bolinas CLT) responded to the residents' call for action and worked with them to acquire the red-tagged employee housing on Tacherra Ranch. The CLT established three stages for the project: getting residents out of the red-tagged employee housing, moving them into emergency housing, and rebuilding quality permanent housing for the farmworkers. Since this was Bolinas CLT's first time acquiring farmworker housing, the organization had to make several intentional shifts to ensure the project moved forward in a way that was sensitive to the community's needs.

For example, the organization hired four bilingual and bicultural staff to build trust with the community and did not ask for the documentation status of residents. Bolinas CLT also made sure tenants had their own legal representation to help them review their contracts, which they were able to obtain through California Rural Legal Assistance. In addition, since the original property had been red-tagged, Bolinas CLT received support from private funders and a $662,000 grant from Marin County to place the residents in emergency housing before they began working on renovations.[71] With this critical assistance and solutions-based approach, Bolinas CLT was able to prevent the displacement of 60 residents.

The seeds of this have already been planted in the Coastside. In 2024, Puente de la Costa Sur launched Puente Housing Solutions LLC (PHS) "to advance and preserve affordable, safe, and dignified housing on San Mateo County's South Coast."[72] PHS acquired the former Delano Nursery site, a 13.5-acre property on Pescadero's North Street, which includes a multifamily residential building for farmworkers, and is now in the stages of finding a developer to work with residents to build their vision for housing. Like in Bolinas, farmworker tenants will stay housed during the repairs and renovations.

Local governments can play a powerful role in bringing these proven models to scale. Especially in San Mateo County, these projects require large amounts of funding for acquisition and rehabilitation, given the high cost of land. But bold and visionary leadership can bridge the gap, as Marin County did by granting Bolinas CLT one-time funding to realize the Tacherra Ranch project. The City of Berkeley approved $10 million for its Small Sites Acquisition Fund in June 2024, and six months later, that fund supported the acquisition of a 12-unit building through the Bay Area Community Land Trust.[73]

Similarly, San Mateo County has Measure K dollars that it could set aside into a Small Sites Acquisition Fund for community-controlled housing. Any future housing revenue measures could also allow funds to be used for community-controlled housing solutions. The County could also transfer land they own for little to no cost in order to further preservation efforts and stabilize housing for farmworkers.

By supporting community-controlled housing, San Mateo County can ensure permanent housing for farmworkers that will maintain its affordability levels for generations, regardless of residents' employment status.

photo credit: Puente de la Costa Sur

EMPOWER FARMWORKER ADMINISTRATIVE BODIES TO IMPLEMENT THESE RECOMMENDATIONS

Ultimately, these are all considerations that are still under development and need additional input from farmworker organizers and farmworker administrative bodies. Fortunately, San Mateo County already has laid a strong foundation for this work to build off of. The San Mateo County's Farmworker Advisory Commission is the first of its kind in the state, with meetings run in Spanish with English interpretation. The Commission is made up of farmworkers, community organizations, and agricultural industry representatives, and advises "government bodies in their decision-making process through direct citizen participation."[74]

Empowering the Commission with more responsibilities and authority would allow it to be an effective advisor to the County for its outreach, employee housing inspection and code enforcement process, and policy development. For example, the Commission could assist the County in creating a Farmworker Rental Assistance Program or a concrete relocation policy when an employee housing unit is red-tagged or yellow-tagged. The Commission is also made up of trusted community members who can help the County engage farmworkers to advise on additional tenant protection policies or further development of the farmworker housing inspection and code enforcement process. The Commission could further help identify sites that are ideal for acquisition and rehabilitation for community-controlled housing models.

The County also has the Farm Labor Housing Task Force, but it is focused on employee housing and not equipped to address farmworker issues in other types of housing. The County could create a department for the unincorporated communities and staff it with bicultural and bilingual staff who can build trust with the farmworker community. As the municipal government of the unincorporated areas, San Mateo County has a responsibility to improve the conditions of those residents, especially marginalized communities like farmworkers. Having dedicated staff for residents of unincorporated areas will not only strengthen communication with community members, but also improve the County's efficiency.

By leveraging administrative bodies and resources, San Mateo County can ensure that it is working alongside farmworkers to implement effective change and establish permanently healthy and affordable housing.

photo credit: Puente de la Costa Sur

CONCLUSION

In the face of threats of eviction, deportation, and layoffs, farmworkers continue to organize for better conditions. Despite low wages and substandard housing, many of the farmworkers we interviewed shared their immense pride in their work and their community. From fighting for clean water at Pescadero High School to acquiring and preserving affordable housing, farmworkers are taking their future into their own hands. The recommendations in this report are the first steps San Mateo County should take to work together with farmworkers and follow them into a world of dignified housing for all.

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> **DIGNIFIED HOUSING IS WHERE YOU FEEL COMFORTABLE AND SAFE.**
> **WHERE YOU FEEL THAT YOU HAVE RIGHTS.**
> **WHERE THEY WON'T NEGLECT YOUR NEEDS.**
>
> **-** Sofía, Coastside

photo credit: Amanda Chang

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