

**FARMWORKERS**

## Farmworkers need affordable housing, new study reports

Shelter costly for low-income families



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Saying more farmworkers are residing in Napa County on a permanent basis, a new report on their housing needs recommends the county and cities put more effort into building affordable housing large enough for their families.

The report also advocates maintaining the county's three farmworker housing centers — 46 percent of workers surveyed consider the centers a permanent home — and states that undocumented

workers need more access to permanent, affordable housing because they can't live in federally funded housing.

The county Board of Supervisors approved spending \$110,000 in January 2012 on the report as a way of gauging what kinds of housing farmworkers need.

A consulting firm, Bay Area Economics, hired by the county spent months surveying 350 farmworkers, along with contacting experts and using other research methods. A draft report was released this week and discussed at a meeting of the Napa County Housing Commission on Thursday.

The report estimates that more than 7,000 workers are employed in vineyards during the peak growing season, and most qualify as low- to very-low income households, relative to the median income locally. Almost half of the workers surveyed identified themselves as undocumented.

The report said 95 percent of the surveyed workers were originally from Mexico, and 54 percent considered Napa County their permanent home. The average age for the men was 33 years old, and they had worked in Napa County for an average of a little more than seven years.

On average, local farmworkers earned 30 percent higher hourly wages compared to the statewide average, according to a 2009 UC Davis study, but still struggle to afford market-rate housing in Napa County, the report states.

The three farmworker centers offer meals and dormitory-style living, and are subsidized with a \$10 per planted acre assessment from Napa County vintners. That assessment was approved in 2002 and recently renewed.

Auction Napa Valley has been supplying grants to the centers, but is planning a phase-out of those donations. The centers also receive money from the cities and county.

The report notes that the centers have seen increased demand since 2007, as more workers

have been staying for longer periods of time.

While 61 percent of the workers surveyed reported being satisfied with their current housing situation, 70 percent said they would prefer to have houses large enough for their families.

Some commissioners were sharply critical of the report, saying it didn't provide enough of a plan on how to accomplish its recommendations.

"I don't find any guidance here in terms of how big the problem is and how it can be realistically addressed," Commissioner Reverdy Johnson said. "From my vantage point, I was looking for more than you've provided here."

Commissioner Louis Flores questioned how satisfied the workers are with their living situations.

"Are you satisfied because that's all there is, or are you satisfied because you really like it?" Flores said.

He said the low- to very-low income status of many workers means they need subsidized housing from the federal government — called Section 8 housing — and funding for that may be drying up with the automatic budget cuts tied to sequestration.

"Affordable housing is like beauty, it's in the eye of the beholder," Flores said. "They're lucky to net \$25,000 a year. Section 8 housing almost doesn't exist. After the sequester (on Friday), there may not be any federal money for any kind of housing."

Consultant Matt Kowta responded that the report is intended to help prioritize how local governments should spend money on housing.

"It's about targeting priorities with funds we do have available," Kowta said. "It's going to be really important to get it right with the resources that are available."

Larry Florin, the director of the county's Housing and Intergovernmental Affairs Department, said the report will help the county in making funding decisions. Before knowing the results, a new farmworker housing center in the south county seemed like a priority. "That may not be the most urgent need right now," Florin said.

The county has been offered two properties — one near St. Helena, the other north of Napa on Silverado Trail — that could be the sites of future housing centers for farmworkers. Florin said the county is doing environmental review of the sites currently, and an update is due to the Board of Supervisors in April.

Flores said fellow commissioner Moises Sanchez, a farmworker who lives in a center, demonstrates that the need for family housing for farmworkers is real.

"If he could go home to his family at night he'd be a very happy man," Flores said.

"I agree with what Louis said," Sanchez said, speaking through a translator.