

COVID-19 EXPOSES MIGRANT WORKER CONDITIONS AMOUNTING TO MODERN DAY SLAVERY IN FLORIDA AGRICULTURE

My home county, Alachua County in Florida, has been rocked by news that came out just after noon yesterday, that, as of that time, 76 agricultural workers in the county had tested positive for COVID-19. Today, that number appears to have grown even more, as the Florida COVID-19 dashboard shows 91 new cases of the disease being added on June 10 and 11, bringing the total to only 506. That means that this outbreak in only two days has grown the total for the county by about 20%.

Here is the report from one of the local television stations:

Although the particular farm where the outbreak occurred is not identified, this report appears to confirm my first suspicion, which is that due to the time of year, this outbreak almost certainly had to be among migrant workers harvesting watermelons, which are at the height of their season now locally.

The problem of migrant agricultural workers living and working under conditions conducive to an outbreak of the virus is not localized to Alachua County, of course, as we have been aware for some time of a severe outbreak in Immokalee. As AP reported today:

Immokalee is among several immigrant communities in Florida – and numerous rural areas across the U.S. – that have recently experienced outbreaks of the

coronavirus. Once thought likely to be spared because of their remote locations and small populations, such communities have seen spikes in infections while having fewer resources to deal with them.

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The secluded town of 25,000 north of the Everglades has reported more than 1,000 cases, outpacing in recent weeks the rate of infection in Orlando, which has a population 10 times bigger and is home to a busy international airport. The number of total cases in Immokalee has surpassed those in Miami Beach, with more than 900, and St. Petersburg, which has more than 800, according to state health department statistics.

Meanwhile, the percentage of tests that have come back positive in Collier County, home to Immokalee, is the highest in the state among counties that have tested more than 5,000 people.

Because they initially couldn't get the attention of state officials in Florida, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers enlisted Doctors Without Borders to help them with testing and treatment. But that is not enough. See their website for their very simple demands and how you can lend your name to their call for help. Here is Greg Asbed of the Coalition in a New York Times Op-Ed published back in April:

Picture yourself waking up in a decrepit, single-wide trailer packed with a dozen strangers, four of you to every room, all using the same cramped bathroom and kitchen before heading to work. You ride to and from the fields in the back of a hot, repurposed school bus, shoulder-to-shoulder with 40 more strangers, and when the workday is done, you wait for your turn to shower and

cook before you can lay your head down to sleep. That is life for far too many farmworkers in our country today.

Those conditions, the result of generations of grinding poverty and neglect, will act like a superconductor for the transmission of the coronavirus. And if something isn't done – now – to address their unique vulnerability, the men and women who plant, cultivate and harvest our food will face a decimating wave of contagion and misery in a matter of weeks, if not days.

Yes, Greg told us so. The conditions under which migrant agricultural workers are forced to work in the US are horrific and incredibly conducive to disease outbreaks.

Returning to the story here in Alachua County, I want to share information I received today from the farmer who runs the CSA from which our family gets its produce for much of the year (today was coincidentally our final pickup for a while, as production pauses during the hottest part of the summer). It turns out that some of the footage (but not the watermelon harvest footage) in the TV story above was shot, without permission, at his farm, presumably because his farm is very close to town and media outlets tend to contact him about any agricultural story. He shared with us his response to the media organizations that contacted him regarding the outbreak:

Our produce has always been safe. We have always practiced good hygiene and field work is by nature socially distanced work.

The problem is when people work and live and travel in groups. The American system of farming depends on mobile low wage workers who are are powerless to poor conditions. I've seen 15 people living in a single wide mobile home that

another local farm pays for. The workers don't make enough to live elsewhere and their work is transient because our American model of production is based on the efficiency of monoculture.

People will get sick when they live in crappy conditions. You should do a story that brings modern day slavery to light in Alachua county. Don't put our farm in with all the rest. We have a safe normal job with benefits for our workers. We pay a living wage and retain employees for years. That is not the norm for agriculture in the United States. People demand cheap produce and people in the shadows pay the price. That should be the theme of your story.

And don't call it a community. A community is when people live stably together. These people travel up and down the east coast. Their children miss school or they are separated from their parents. They have no home and their families are split up for economic reasons. Calling it community is just more ignorance for the general public who have no idea where food comes from.

Wow. That is just so damning in how our country goes about producing food. These migrant workers really are trapped in a modern version of slavery with virtually no chance of escape. They are forced into cramped living and working conditions that put them much more at risk than those affluent citizens whom they feed. And our media mostly misses the true impact of those conditions and the fact that it doesn't have to be that way. My CSA costs are a bit higher than buying the same items at the local grocery store, but the difference is very small. When you factor in the cruelty of the modern slavery system and the cost to society when outbreaks like this hit workers, our current system can be characterized as nothing less than heartless evil.

Oh, and one last note in parting. The Gainesville Sun article on the outbreak opened with this gem:

One farm worker who traveled to Alachua County from Miami-Dade County unknowingly infected at least 76 additional workers with COVID-19.

A total of 98 people traced back to the worker were tested for the virus Saturday evening, said Paul Myers, administrator for the Department of Health in Alachua County. Eight tested negative, and 14 tests are still pending.

Hmmm. So one person coming here from South Florida managed to infect over 70 (and likely now around 90) people with COVID-19. And yet, our esteemed governor is hell-bent on "opening" the University of Florida this fall. Yes, there are plans to "screen" students before they're allowed on campus. And students don't live with 15 or so people in a single wide trailer. But student living groups like fraternities, sororities and dorms do wind up with many students in close quarters. And does anyone really think that student parties or even student bars downtown will follow social distancing guidelines?

This will not end well.