



Mass**COSH**

Testimony in Support of H1979 / S1205 - An Act establishing fairness for agricultural laborers (Representative Gonzalez / Senator Carlos Gomez)

My name is Jodi Sugerman-Brozan. I am the Executive Director at the Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety & Health, or MassCOSH, and I am here today to testify in support of H1979/S205 – An act establishing fairness for agricultural workers.

More than 13,000 farmworkers are employed on farms across Massachusetts. They plant and harvest fruits and vegetables, grow trees and shrubs in nurseries and greenhouses, produce dairy products, and raise fish and livestock.

They are essential workers, providing much of the food our families eat, yet they are excluded from minimum wage and overtime laws. That exclusion means they are often forced to work 6-7 days per week, and long days, to make enough money to put food on their own tables. And even working those hours, farm workers experience poverty at twice the rate of other Massachusetts workers.

But that is not the only impact. Long hours also lead to stress, injury, working in pain, and worst:

- In 2018, 574 agricultural workers in the US were fatally injured on the job in 2018 – 6 in Massachusetts - and 17,390 experienced nonfatal occupational injuries and illnesses in 2018 that resulted in days away from work.
- They work in difficult conditions, often with no OSHA protections. Farms with fewer than 10 workers are exempt from OSHA protections. And there are no standards to protect works from one of the biggest work hazards:

extreme heat. We know the impact it had this summer as heat waves impacted the entire nation. Rest, shade and water are critical to keep workers safe, and none of that is mandated.

- And there is one more hazard farm workers in Massachusetts face: opioid addiction and overdose. An alarming study released by the Department of Public Health yesterday showed that the Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, and Hunting industry saw tragic increases in the number of workers lost to opioid overdose deaths, more than doubling from 107.5 deaths per 100,000 workers in 2011-2015 vs. 220.8 in 2016-2017.
- Hispanic workers also found themselves hard hit by increased opioid overdose deaths. In 2011, the rate among Hispanic workers was about half the rate of white, non-Hispanic workers, but, beginning in 2012, the Hispanic rate increased sharply each year as to be on par with the white, non-Hispanic rate by 2016. The study found that overdose death rates were significantly higher among workers in occupation groups with lower percentages of workers covered by paid sick leave than among workers in occupation groups with higher percentages of those covered by leave.

How do we address these issues? It is time to end the legacy of structural racism that has led to the exclusion of farm workers from minimum wage and overtime laws. It is time to provide those workers the pay, benefits and REST they deserve. It could literally save lives.

Please report this bill out of committee favorably.