



Improving Confidence and Building Culture For Health and Safety on Farms

Since 2006, OHCOW has provided occupational health support to more than a thousand migrant farm workers and their employers in Ontario through clinical consultations for individuals with occupational health concerns, and prevention-based occupational health and safety materials, tools and workshops. **All our services are free of charge.** This factsheet draws from our experience as well as from research conducted by other health and safety organizations working with migrant workers

Culture Makes a Difference

Making workplaces safe and healthy involves the collaboration of all workplace parties which is why an ‘internal responsibility system’ is the core framework of Ontario’s Occupational Health and Safety Act. For this to be effective, it is important that workers feel as though they can ask questions, raise concerns, understand issues and be involved in developing health and safety solutions.

Some migrant farm workers voice feeling intimidated to ask questions about work practices or to identify health and safety concerns. Several reasons are described: they will get in trouble, be seen as a nuisance, or perceived as incapable of performing the work tasks if they ask questions. Migrant workers particularly fear being “sent home” if they raise concerns. It is important to recognize and address these fears in order to achieve an open, collaborative, healthy, safe and productive work place culture.

Promote worker confidence in engaging with health and safety:

- Communicate frequently and openly, encouraging conversation, questions and feedback
- Emphasize the importance of asking questions for clarification. Ask workers to demonstrate or re-iterate for confirmation.
- Listen. Consistently give workers a chance to speak and/or ask for feedback (e.g. “what do you think?”) to encourage contribution, participation and also increased engagement.
- Explain that responding to concerns raised by workers helps improve conditions for all workplace parties, and are not part of blaming or firing people.
- Encourage workers who are less confident communicating in English to refer concerns through a co-worker who can help them with communication.
- Where possible provide basic health and safety materials and/or training in the workers’ language or with the assistance of a competent translator or translating device

Build a positive health and safety culture:

- Highlight the internal responsibility system and the role of all parties in collaborating for health and safety in the workplace

- Demonstrate a strong commitment to safety through postings, orientation, training and the provision of hazard information, and ensuring equipment is in good repair
- Pace work so that workers do not feel the need to compromise safety to meet production demands
- Emphasize the importance of reporting hazards, near misses and especially accidents for proper follow-up and future prevention
- Recognize that workers may come with pre-conceived ideas that may complicate their understanding of safety instructions or practices, and solicit teachable moments to address those eg. Fear of the “shock” of cold water on hot days, and the hazardous use of mineral salts like “suero” as hydration aids.
- Promote health by providing access to hand washing and laundry facilities.

Celebrate success stories where worker ideas have made a difference to health, safety, productivity and/or quality eg. From a local farm:

- Workers told farmer that round single-person carrying baskets are awkward to carry, and are causing strains to their backs.
- Employer researched better carrying boxes and eventually purchased (cheaper!) plastic crates that can be carried by two people to share the weight
- Employer notes that since the change workers have been more productive, and have not experienced the same back discomfort.



For more information about the materials, services and workshops we offer on this topic or others contact:

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References:

- HSE Human Factors Briefing Note No. 8 Safety-Critical Communications- Health and Safety Executive.
- Leadership and worker involvement toolkit: Effective communication and gaining co-operation-Health and Safety Executive
- Common Topics 3: Safety Critical Communications-Health and Safety Executive
- Protecting migrant workers-Health and Safety Executive