



# Communicating Health and Safety Effectively For Employers of (Migrant) Farm Workers

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.

## Communication

Communication is the key to a healthy, safe and productive workplace. It is needed to ensure roles and directions are understood; to warn against dangers; to avoid unsafe practices; to promote critical emergency response and particularly to learn about (and from!) the concerns and hazards that workers encounter.

**“I did not understand the directions they gave, I just tried to watch how my co-worker was doing the work, but I still felt unsure for quite some time”**

Migrant farm workers often have limited speaking and comprehension skills in English and may also be reluctant (in their anxiety to work) to let on when they don't understand. Literacy can also be an issue. Not addressing these factors in workplace communication and training can put everyone in the workplace at risk.

## Therefore where possible:

- Provide instructions, materials and training in the language of the workers (OHCOW can help find or verify). E.g. [http://www.labour.gov.on.ca/english/hs/pubs/poster\\_prevention.php](http://www.labour.gov.on.ca/english/hs/pubs/poster_prevention.php)
- Use materials and training with clear images or symbols
- Repeat key information in different ways: written, verbal, and visual formats
- Participation and engagement are critical: Consistently ask for feedback or ideas from workers regarding information being presented (e.g. “what do you think?”)
- Identify workers who may be more proficient in English, and support them to be communication aides for others.
- Encourage workers to ask for repetition or clarification when they do not understand.
- Use a ‘buddy’ system, pairing less and more experienced workers who speak the same language.
- Include comprehension testing activities as part of training to measure understanding.
- Train supervisors on how to communicate clearly, to be patient, to check understanding and to encourage feedback
- Pace work so that there is adequate time to communicate effectively
- Ensure important communications are not muffled by workplace noise
- Look for an opportunity to provide ‘workplace English’ lessons or resources to interested workers

## Workers Need to Know:

- OHS Rights and Responsibilities, and what that means to them
- Farm/Business Safety Roles, Policy and Procedures and what they mean in practice
- How to get help in an Emergency (see below)
- Hazards and Risks they face in their jobs; Why and how they are to be controlled
- Safe working practices they should follow; how well they are doing so; and consequences if they don't
- Healthy hygiene practices when working with soil, chemicals or biohazards
- Where they can get more safety information (ideally posted where they congregate)
- The importance of communicating about safety: to each other, to their supervisor, to management, and to visitors or outside contractors who face the same hazards
- The importance of reporting injuries and illness in order to ensure treatment and prevention

## Emergency Planning:

Emergency planning and communication is key to ensure an effective response when every minute counts.

- Advise workers whom to call first and provide the means to do so (eg. Radio or cell phone). Ideally every location should have a designated first aid responder.
- Train workers with some English proficiency to call 911 if the supervisor or responder can't be reached or the situation is serious.
- Provide workers with cards that clearly state the address of the farm and specific directions to the work location (eg. Field) if different.
- Train workers in identifying and responding to heat stroke, eg. cooling the victim with water and moving them closer to the road for faster access.
- Practice with mock drills, giving everyone a chance to play a role

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

### **Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers (OHCOW) Hamilton Clinic**

1877-817-0336 or 905-549-2552: ex 2221

848 Main Street East Hamilton, Ontario

[www.ohcow.on.ca](http://www.ohcow.on.ca)



#### 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
- Communication a tool for better safety, compliance and understanding of migrant workers-Margarita Caropresi, Director and Chief editor Atoctli.