Making an Impact: Spotlight on Washington State

In this series, we turn the spotlight to Washington State, which has implemented some innovative activities to help farmworkers.

Background on agriculture in Washington:

- Washington employs approximately 100,000 farmworkers during peak season.
- Washington is a Migrant and Seasonal Farmworker (MSFW) significant state with nine significant MSFW local offices. Significant MSFW local offices are designated annually by the Department of Labor. They include those employment service (ES) offices where MSFWs account for 10 percent or more of annual participants in employment services and those local ES offices which the administrator determines must be included due to special circumstances such as an estimated large number of MSFWs in the service area.
- Washington farmers produce over 300 commodities.
- Top 10 commodities include: Apples, milk, potatoes, cattle, wheat, cherries, hay, hops, grapes, and pears.

In a recent interview, Washington’s State Monitor Advocate (SMA), Rene Maldonado, summarized Washington’s efforts to help marginalized populations, specifically MSFWs. He said, “We strive to help.” Rene explained that the state recently ramped-up efforts to serve marginalized populations. He attributes this focus to the new Commissioner for the Employment Security Department (ESD), Suzan “Suzi” LeVine. According to Rene, “She made serving farmworkers a priority.”

So, what exactly is Washington doing? In Rene’s words, Washington is focusing on the following activities:

**Cross-training**

- We have a program called “In Training Pathways.” It is akin to an apprenticeship program for Washington’s ESD employees and everyone has to go through this training. This means we all become proficient in every program offered through Washington’s American Job Centers (AJCs), including the Monitor Advocate System, National
Farmworker Jobs Program (NFJP) grantee, Foreign Labor Certification, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, Reentry, and other DOL programs. For example, staff from other programs will accompany our outreach workers while they conduct outreach. This gives them an idea of what the Monitor Advocate System is about, what outreach workers do, and what it is like for MSFWs in WA. After the ESD staff have been trained in other programs, they need to take an exam to demonstrate proficiency in those programs. Who benefits? Our MSFW customers benefit because when an MSFW has a need, if Employment Service staff know about all the other programs, they can find resources that address that individual farmworkers’ needs.

Outreach

- **Social Media:** AJCs in Washington are thinking about innovative ways to reach farmworkers who are not being reached by normal intake means. One AJC is posting agricultural job opportunities on its Spanish Facebook page ([https://www.facebook.com/EmpleosWashington/](https://www.facebook.com/EmpleosWashington/)). Outreach workers let farmworkers know that they can check the Facebook page to see announcements for agricultural job opportunities. More than 2000 people follow this page.

- **Radio and television:** Two AJCs in Washington have partnered with a local news station. The outreach worker makes periodic announcements on the radio and television in Spanish (the language spoken by a majority of MSFWs in the area) about the AJC opportunities and services that may be of interest to the MSFWs (i.e. jobs for Vets, NFJP, Dislocated worker, etc.).

- **Fairs:** Most AJCs in Washington host an annual fair in front of the building with various stands for service providers to share information and opportunities with the local community.

- **Flexible work hours:** Outreach workers have the flexibility to work outside of standard business hours (8-5pm, M-F). This means the staff is able to meet MSFWs at times when they are available to talk versus going to the fields where farmworkers are often too busy to talk.

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**TRAINING OUTREACH WORKERS SAVES LIVES**

Susie Rangel is an outreach worker in Yakima, Washington. One very hot summer day when Susie was driving, she saw a farmworker laying on the ground beside a field.

Susie had recently received heat stress training and had learned about the harmful effects of heat on farmworkers. Susie decided to stop and check on this farmworker.

Susie discovered that he was unconscious and suffering from heat exhaustion. She immediately called the ambulance and quickly rushed him to the hospital. Because of Susie’s training, she was able to recognize the symptoms of heat stroke and take timely action, which saved his life.
Partnerships:

- By partnering with the NFJP grantee, outreach workers and NFJP grantee representatives conduct joint presentations and conferences. Whenever an MSFW needs an emergency service, they are immediately referred to the NFJP grantee. When the NFJP grantee is providing training, the ESD provides classroom space and helps recruit farmworkers to attend the classes.
- We are also partnering with Washington’s Labor and Industries Department, which offers free workplace safety and health training in agriculture through its WISHA10 program. One issue they were having was that they were offering free classes in Spanish but people were not filling them. The ESD created an incentive for job seekers, which helps MSFWs in the off-season. Job seekers can get their three weekly job search requirements waived by attending the training. The training is offered in Spanish, so it is accessible to most of the MSFWs in the area. This incentive is available at all of Washington’s significant MSFW AJCs. ESD also ensured that outreach workers shared the training opportunity with employers because the free training helps supervisors keep workers safe and trains them on what to do if a worker gets hurt. We have been hearing from the employers that this is an added value to their business. This benefits employers because workers are safer and it benefits workers because they get a card saying they have been trained on how to be safer.

Research

- “We listen to the customer.” We are currently, conducting surveys and focus groups. There is an effort to look at services for Limited English Proficiency (LEP) individuals in Washington. We want to know how well we are serving LEP individuals and how we can improve. Are we truly speaking to farmworkers? Are we truly engaging them? Are we providing a safe and inviting environment to make them want to come to the AJCs? In order to answer these questions I need to look at data. That is why we are having focus groups to find out how can we best serve Washington’s LEP individuals.

Next Steps

- If you are interested in receiving more information about how Washington is serving farmworkers, please contact the Washington State Monitor Advocate, Rene Maldonado at RMaldonado@ESD.WA.GOV.

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1 See https://www.lni.wa.gov/Safety/TrainingPrevention/WISHA10/