



Migrant Worker Health Expert Working Group
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December 7, 2021

Dr. Matt Strauss
Acting Medical Officer of Health
Haldimand-Norfolk Public Health Unit
12 Gilbertson Drive
P.O. Box 570, Simcoe ON
N3Y 4N5

CC: Kristal Chopp
Chair of the Haldimand-Norfolk Board of Health
Mayor of Norfolk County
50 Colborn Street South
Simcoe, Ontario
N3Y 4H3

SENT VIA EMAIL

Re: Haldimand-Norfolk Section 22 for migrant agricultural workers in 2022

Dear Dr. Strauss,

We write to you today in our capacity as members of the [Migrant Worker Health Expert Working Group \(MWH - EWG\)](#), an interdisciplinary team of scholars and clinicians with decades of experience working with, and studying the experiences of, migrant agricultural workers in Canada. The MWH-EWG formed in April 2020 to address the needs of migrant agricultural workers in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, the MWH-EWG has provided [evidence-based guidance](#) to federal and provincial government agencies, local public health units, the Public Health Agency of Canada, and sending country officials, and we have authored several sets of recommendations to address the various health challenges faced by migrant agricultural workers in Canada.

Among the many [concerns that we have made public](#), employer-provided congregate housing is often crowded and substandard and emerged as one of the most dangerous hazards faced by migrant agricultural workers in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, migrant worker housing is about more than a place to sleep and eat. Employer-provided housing is where migrant agricultural workers live. For much of the pandemic, many workers were tethered to this housing due to quarantine demands and situations where workers were not allowed to leave the farm. In addition to increased risk for infectious disease transmission (e.g., COVID-19), the consequences of substandard housing include poor physical and mental health and indicate a lack of fundamental respect for workers' human dignity.

Since the onset of the pandemic, we have urged the federal government to improve housing standards for migrant agricultural workers, particularly during the 14-day quarantine period. In fact, we asked that the rest of Canada to follow BC's lead in providing private hotel rooms for each worker during this period.

In June 2020, we wrote [a letter to the Chair of the Haldimand-Norfolk Board of Health](#), Kristal Chopp, to express our support for the medical officer's health decision to restrict three workers to a single bunkhouse during the quarantine period. Our letter was later discussed at the [Special Meeting](#) of the Haldimand-Norfolk Health Unit on June 19, 2020.

With the recent emergence of the Omicron variant, we are writing you today to express our support for current existing restrictions. We encourage the continuation of the existing Section 22 orders in Haldimand-Norfolk, and we believe that other regions should adopt and implement the same measures.

Furthermore, while we recognize the efforts undertaken by local health officials in Norfolk-Haldimand to ensure that migrant agricultural workers have access to COVID-19 vaccines, the MWH-EWG has raised [concerns over the vaccination process](#) for migrant agricultural workers in Ontario. We have received numerous reports by migrant workers across Ontario that they have been threatened with termination and repatriation for not participating in the vaccination process, or that they were not able to have their questions answered in advance of a vaccine campaign. While we strongly support all workers having timely access to vaccines, they must also have the opportunity to ask questions and receive individual counselling from an independent health care provider around their decision without pressure or interference from their employers.

Although accepted in Canada, the practice of mixing COVID-19 vaccines has particularly impacted workers from Trinidad and Tobago, whose country does not recognize them as fully vaccinated. As a result, these workers must quarantine at their own expense upon returning home. The cost of this quarantine period averages approximately \$2,800, which is an incredibly high cost for workers who may earn \$10,000 of gross income for the season. We know that many workers received their first dose at the airport upon arrival, which posed some challenges for local public health units to provide these workers with a second dose of the same vaccine. Looking ahead to next season, we recommend that all migrant agricultural workers receiving their COVID-19 vaccines in Canada receive the same vaccine for both doses.

To mitigate issues related to second dose scheduling of COVID-19 vaccines for migrant workers next season, we recommend the following:

- If provided in the worker's home country, date, type (adenovirus vs RNA), and brand of vaccine should travel with the worker to Canada. Any guidelines available regarding mixing vaccine types and brands should be utilized in deciding on what vaccine should be used for the second dose.
- At the time of the first dose, workers should be informed that they will receive a second dose of the vaccine and they will be contacted with details as that time approaches.
- The follow up process for second doses should be clarified by public health, considering vaccine brand availability. When this process has been finalized, it should be clearly communicated to workers as part of airport or other site vaccinations.
- Second dose timing should consider the worker's work permit expiry date, to ensure that workers receive their second dose of vaccine prior to returning home, as the vaccines provided in Ontario may not be available in their home country.
- Workers should also have the opportunity communicate directly to public health units to safeguard workers' access to this second dose (ideally an information sheet should be given to them in their language upon their first vaccination, with a preliminary second dose date, and number to call if they should need to depart Canada before this date).

Furthermore, workers from Mexico and the Organization of the Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) are having trouble obtaining their vaccination certificates because they are having trouble accessing the relevant passport information to return to work this upcoming season. Although vaccine certificates are issued by Ontario Health, vaccination itself is often conducted by local public health agencies. Given the importance of information sharing in this context between the province and local health units, the collection of data should be streamlined for migrant agricultural workers and steps should be taken to ensure that the name used on a worker's OHIP card matches the name on their work permit and passport.

In November 2020, we formulated [recommendations for Public Health Units in Canada](#) to 'Reduce the Burden of COVID-19 among Migrant Agricultural Workers,' and we hope these may be helpful. We also made a [submission](#) to the federal housing consultation in December 2020, and given the recently released [summary of their findings](#), we look forward to a more comprehensive announcement of federal housing standards in 2022.

We would welcome the opportunity to provide further guidance and support to keep workers safe.

Sincerely,

The Migrant Worker Health Expert Working Group (www.migrantworker.ca)

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