

Meeting Minutes: Governor's Committee on the Safety, Health, and Wellbeing of Agricultural and Food Processing Workers

DATE: 04/27/2021

MINUTES PREPARED BY: MIKE ZASTOUPIL

Attendance

Present

- **Andrea Vaubel**, Deputy Commissioner, Minnesota Department of Agriculture
- **Hamse Warfa**, Deputy Commissioner, Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development
- **Rena Wong**, Director of Organizing, United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 663
- **Jennifer Christensen**, President, United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 1189
- **Colin Laffey**, AWP Project Manager, Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services (SMRLS)
- **Emilia Gonzalez Avalos**, Executive Director, Unidos MN
- **Rodolfo Gutierrez**, Executive Director, HACER
- **Susan Bishop**, Supervisor, Minnesota Department of Health, and Migrant Agricultural Worker Response Lead, ICS
- **Nicole Blissenbach**, Deputy Commissioner, Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry
- **Tamara Nelsen**, Executive Director, Minnesota AgriGrowth Council
- **Gary Wertish**, President, Minnesota Farmers Union
- **Kiza Olson**, CHS Administrator, Meeker-McLeod-Sibley Community Health Services
- **Sarah Berry**, Waseca County Public Health Director, Southwest/West Central Community Health Board
- **Kristi Halvarson**, Executive Director, Community Health Service, Inc.
- **Kevin Paap**, President, Minnesota Farm Bureau
- **Lorrie Janatopoulos**, CareerForce Director, Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development
- **Maureen Ramirez**, Director of the Office of Economic Opportunity, Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development

- **Carrie Rigdon**, Operations and Planning Section Manager, Minnesota Department of Agriculture
- **Mike Zastoupil**, Food Access Associate, Minnesota Department of Health
- **Peggy Flanagan**, Lieutenant Governor, State of Minnesota
- **Maria Estela Hernandez**, State Monitor Advocate, Minnesota Department of Agriculture
- **Chris McNulty**, Deputy General Counsel, Minnesota Department of Agriculture

Absent

- None

Agenda

- 1:00 PM **Welcome and Opening Remarks** – Lt. Governor Flanagan
- 1:10 PM **Introductions of Committee Members** – DC Warfa and Vaubel and Committee Members
- 1:30 PM **Overview of Executive Order** – Lorrie Janatopoulos, DEED and Maureen Ramirez, DEED
- 1:40 PM **Background of State Agency Work with Migrant and Seasonal Workers** – Maria Estela Hernandez, DEED and Lorrie Janatopoulos, DEED
- 1:50 PM **Overview of Open Meeting Law** – Chris McNulty, MDA
- 2:15 PM **Discussion of Next Steps**
- 2:30 PM **Adjourn**

Meeting notes

Welcome and Opening Remarks

Lieutenant Governor Flanagan began by remarking how COVID-19 has only exacerbated the struggles that migrant and seasonal agricultural workers have faced for a very long time. She stated that it is a “time to reassess” how we support the health and wellness of these important members of our community, and that it is this committee’s task to develop policy recommendations toward this effort. She concluded by acknowledging that this has been a traumatic year for everyone, and that she is grateful for the service of this committee during these unprecedented times.

Introductions of Committee Members

All members of the committee introduced themselves, including Deputy Commissioners Vaubel and Warfa. Members shared their personal experiences that can contribute to the committee, as well as their hopes for what this committee will accomplish. Some of the common hopes included protecting agricultural workers, protecting the food supply, and collaborating to find solutions to issues that have been unaddressed for decades.

Overview of Executive Order

Maureen reminded everyone that the purpose of the committee is to protect the safety, health, and wellbeing of workers who are critical to Minnesota's agricultural sector. She listed the primary objectives of the committee that support its purpose and reiterated the expectations of the committee. The committee has two important deadlines for the Governor. The first is to produce a report describing the committee's plan for achieving its objectives that must be submitted to the Governor by August 1st, 2021. The second is to produce a report describing the specific policy recommendations that will have a lasting impact on protecting the safety, health, and wellbeing of agricultural workers in Minnesota. The second report must be submitted to the Governor by December 1st, 2021.

Background of State Agency Work with Migrant and Seasonal Workers

Lorrie Janatopoulos provided the background story of how the efforts of the Interagency Migrant and Seasonal Work Group led to the Executive Order being passed. The work group formed in the Spring of 2020 with the establishment of the Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker COVID Response Unit at MDH. As this unit was planning the COVID response, the work group connected with other agencies to better understand their roles and any available data for situational awareness. They learned that numerous agencies have regulatory authority for facilities, housing, safety regulations, and workers' rights. For example, housing oversight is defused; two agencies and numerous delegated authorities regulate and inspect facilities. It became clear that effective COVID-19 response efforts were inextricably linked to housing and transportation due to living and working conditions that were too crowded to reduce transmission of COVID-19. In addition, there is very little data available about migrant worker families, when they arrive, and where they are in the State. This made a proactive response difficult. After gathering information from stakeholders from industry, community organizations, and government agencies, it became clear that there was a need to develop a response that included addressing the underlying factors that affect these workers.

Estela gave an overview of what Migrant Seasonal Farmworkers Services is already doing at DEED. Its Migrant Labor Representatives (MLRs) work directly with workers to connect them with a variety of resources regarding employment, housing, healthcare, and more. They operate in four regions in the southern half of the state, with headquarters in Faribault, Willmar, Mankato, and Rochester. Estela concluded with some important statistics about agricultural workers in MN, such as that an estimated 25% of them are age 60 or older, and an estimated 61% of them report limited English language proficiency.

Overview of Open Meeting Law

Chris McNulty gave a presentation about all the requirements this committee will need to follow regarding the open meeting law in Minnesota. In general, anything put into writing by the committee is considered public information – emails, documents, etc. Members of the public are allowed to join any meetings they would like, which is why information on how to join the meeting needs to be posted in advance on the DEED website. Any official records (meeting minutes, reports, etc.) will also be stored on a DEED website (to be created). It is only considered an official “meeting” of the committee if there is a quorum (majority) of members present – for this committee, 8 or more people would constitute a quorum. Since we are meeting remotely, any official votes on committee decisions must be conducted by roll call only. Chris will be available as a resource if anyone has questions regarding the open meeting law (chris.mcnulty@state.mn.us).

Discussion of Next Steps

The discussion began with the topic of how this group would like to conduct meetings moving forward. Breakout groups were suggested as a way to encourage more open discussion in the future. Some people asked how they should prepare for meetings in the future. For the next meeting, the committee leaders will send out a survey to gather more feedback from the members, which will be shared with the members before the next meeting so they can be more prepared.

The conversation shifted to the topic of data and information about migrant and seasonal farmworkers. Several people expressed an interest in gathering more data so that the committee can be well-informed before they make a plan. The major challenge that the interagency work group found over the past year was the overall lack of trust that agricultural workers have for the government, which it makes it challenging to gather data and rollout programs. Other members from the work group also explained that there simply aren't data about migrant and seasonal farmworkers in many traditional sources. However, a few members mentioned that MDE has a very detailed, comprehensive data on migrant and seasonal farm workers through their surveys. While the committee can't add any more members at this point, the committee can collaborate with MDE. The MDE surveys could possibly be used as a model for the committee to conduct its own survey. The idea of forming a subcommittee to focus on gathering data was mentioned and may be created soon.

Finally, some members suggested that the committee defines its scope of work more explicitly, including its definition of migrant and seasonal agricultural workers. For example, some “migrant” workers have really been living in Minnesota for 10 years or more and consider the state home.

Action items

- Schedule the next two meetings in May via Doodle – DC Vaubel and Mike Zastoupil

- Send committee members a survey about their ideas/goals/preferences – Carrie Rigdon and DC Vaubel
- Establish a website for storing official records for the committee – Mike Zastoupil and Lorrie Janatopoulos