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OPINION

Farmworker health is essential to COVID-19 response | Column

Farmworkers are a uniquely vulnerable population that I have had the opportunity to care for in medical school, writes an FSU student.



In this Feb. 5, 2020, rows of kale are shown on an organic farm in Opa-locka, Fla. [WILFREDO LEE | AP]

By **Edward W. Corty**

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Last month, the Department of Homeland Security deemed farmworkers across the country to be “essential workers”—now, the federal government wants to cut many of their wages. Farmworkers are a uniquely vulnerable population that I have had the opportunity to care for in medical school. Inadequate housing, food insecurity and poor access to healthcare make these proposed wage cuts not only morally wrong, but also dangerous for everyone. If the

administration moves forward with this idea, Florida policymakers must be prepared to support farmworkers in order to secure our food supply chain and the health of the state.

Farmworker housing is inexcusably unsafe—especially during a pandemic. In Immokalee, I've walked through houses where 20 farmworkers and family members—including young children—crowd into dim and damp rooms, with each individual only guaranteed 50 square feet to themselves. [Farmworker surveys](#) show that this is the norm. One only has to look to recent [reporting on migrant worker health in Singapore](#) to see what is coming. This is how COVID-19 spreads.

Last year, I cared for a 40-year-old farmworker with uncontrolled diabetes driven by food insecurity (lacking

enough food to lead an active, healthy life). Numerous studies show that two out of three farmworkers are food insecure. Meaning, the person who picks tomatoes off the plant to give us a full plate, usually does not have enough food to feed her family. And it is well established that food insecurity increases the odds of both diabetes and hypertension, conditions that put someone at risk of the worst forms of COVID-19. This is how COVID-19 becomes severe.



Edward W.
Corty [Courtesy of
Edward W. Corty]

I've watched doctors in a farmworker clinic call colleagues in areas with more advanced equipment to see if anyone could operate on a patient with advanced vascular disease. The most recent National Agricultural Workers Survey showed that over half of all farmworkers have no health insurance. When they

do become sick with COVID-19, farmworkers will be forced into cities to receive care, where health systems are already overwhelmed. This is how COVID-19 explodes.

Greater economic insecurity for farmworkers will exacerbate all of these circumstances—they will live day-to-day instead of week-to-week. Those who are food insecure will be driven into severe food insecurity, thereby increasing rates of diabetes and hypertension. And any fraction of affordable healthcare will be out of reach.

The income of farmers is important, but instead of snatching from the pockets of our most vulnerable, we should look to other parts of the food supply chain to fill this gap. For example, large grocery stores are [doing particularly well](#) during this unprecedented time—they could increase pay for farm products without risking the security of their employees. If there is any change to farmworker wages, it should be a significant *increase* as they continue performing backbreaking work. In addition, farmworkers should receive personal protective equipment, access to COVID-19 testing, and paid sick leave immediately and indefinitely. Farmworkers are finally identified as “essential”—it is time to start treating them like it.

Edward W. Corty is a St. Petersburg native. He is a rising fourth-year medical student at Florida State University and will finish a Master of Public Health degree from Johns Hopkins University next month.