



# Exploitation, Human Rights & Responsibility

## *The plight of the farm worker in Washington State*

A Report from Participants of the 1999 UUSC Just Works Workcamp in Washington State

*Through this project, we reached an understanding that the only way to truly call ourselves Unitarian Universalists is to not only affirm the UU values but to actively promote them through just actions. – UUSC workcampers' statement of principle*

### INTRODUCTION

America is the most prosperous and wealthy country in the world. The level of economic opportunity that exists in our nation is unparalleled anywhere else on the globe. In Washington State, the third largest employer and a huge economic force is agriculture. The sale of Washington-grown produce totals nearly 6 billion dollars annually. The profitability of large-scale agriculture is borne primarily by the labor of farm workers. Undocumented workers from Mexico and Central America comprise as much as 95 percent of the population of migrant and year round employees in the agriculture industry. These people subject themselves to great financial and personal peril to come to Washington State in search of work, higher wages than they can receive in their native countries, and a better life. Entering the United States can cost farm workers thousands of dollars, most of it spent on forged Social Security cards that will allow them to work, and on “coyotes,” or border guides, who escort them into the US.

When these workers arrive in Washington State, instead of opportunity, comfort, or success, they find poverty, horrendous living conditions, racial and economic discrimination, exploitation, and despair. The American mainstream dehumanizes these workers. Their status as individuals is torn from them and replaced by the stigma of “the other” by white American society. These people, following the paths of generations of immigrants before them, come to our country looking for a better life for themselves and their children, only to be victimized by exploitive growers and landlords. Their backbreaking labor, which benefits and simplifies the social and economic lives of middle and upper class Americans, is considered simply a commodity.

This report examines the plight of farm workers in Washington State, telling their stories of survival and documenting their squalid living conditions within the world's wealthiest and most powerful country. Two of the main questions that this report addresses are: who is responsible for creating these conditions, and who is responsible for fixing them? The answer to both questions is all of us: the landlords who profit from the farm workers' lack of housing options and legal resources, the growers who profit from the farm workers' labor, the distributors and wholesalers of produce that profit from the growers, and the consumers who enjoy the industrialized world's lowest food prices. We are all responsible for the plight of the farm workers because we all benefit from their labor and exploitation. Because we gain from farm workers' suffering, our society feels obliged to dehumanize this population and

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trivialize their troubles by attributing the farm workers' situation to their lack of citizenship. Would we, as a nation, tolerate six year-old white American children working in factories? Would we tolerate the head of a large corporation publicly referring to his workers as a commodity, not employees? Would we tolerate housing laborers in tents without electricity or running water in the inner cities?

Because farm workers are often not United States citizens, because they are conveniently out of sight in rural areas, and because we like to believe that their life is better here than in their native countries, we feel no shame for their living and working conditions. With our abundant wealth, we have a responsibility to ensure that those who labor for our benefit do not live in squalid conditions. Providing human rights for and fulfilling the basic needs of those who live and work within our borders, regardless of their citizenship, is a responsibility we have abandoned. It is our moral duty as Americans to acknowledge responsibility for this marginalized population and venture past economic and racial prejudice to examine the struggle of the farm workers as a human rights question.

### **WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE HAVE DONE**

This project is a workcamp of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. The UUSC is an international, non-sectarian human rights organization that has advocated for the needs of the most marginalized segments of the world's population for over 60 years. Over the past four years, it has sponsored workcamps for people of all ages throughout the country. This project began at the request of the youth of the Pacific Northwest District (an area covering Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Alaska, British Columbia and the Yukon Territory). The topic of farm worker issues was selected by the youth, and they assisted in much of the workcamp planning.

The goal of the project was to educate young people in the issues affecting farm workers and to train them to be advocates for farm workers in their local communities. Ten youth, between the ages of 15 and 18, participated in this project. They hailed primarily from Western Washington, but participants also came from Portland, Oregon and Berkeley, California. Along with two young adults and two adult staff, the youth gathered in Yakima, Washington for two weeks in July 1999 to examine the issue of migrant farm worker housing. The scope of the project expanded to the examination of interrelated problems faced by farm workers population in agricultural regions of Washington State.

Over the course of two weeks, the group spoke with many of the major players affecting farm workers' lives. Most days began with a presentation by and discussion with a representative of a group involved in the issue. We met with Guadalupe Gamboa, president of the Washington State United Farm Workers Union; Mike Gempler, president of the Washington Growers League; Natalie Gonzales, Daria Miller, and Mari Parkinson from the Department of Health; Wendy Harris, the social issues reporter for the Yakima Herald Republic and one of the first people to bring this issue into the national spotlight; Nancy Foote, Medical Director of the Yakima Valley Farm workers Clinic; Blanca Hernandez, a parent coordinator and home visitor at the Migrant Head Start Program in Mattawa; Paul Strater, an instructor and coordinator of business development at Yakima Valley Community College; Russell Sherman of Communities Organized for Yakima County, an interfaith social justice organization; and Bob Ingham and Lon Inaba, farmers in the Yakima Valley.

In addition to these meetings, we spent several days in Mattawa, a small town adjoining the Columbia River in Grant County in central Washington, interviewing farm workers in their homes and camps. We discussed their current housing situations, their housing, medical, food, and other basic needs, and heard stories about their experiences as farm workers in Washington State. These stories,

many of which follow, describe the worst and best attempts of the community and growers to provide farm workers with housing and basic services. The group also volunteered in the Mattawa community, working at the Migrant Head Start Program, the Mattawa Food Bank, and the Esperanza Housing Project.

### WHY WE CARE

As Unitarian Universalists, we are bound by a set of seven principles that we commit to *affirm* and *promote*. Among these principles are:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;
- The goal of a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

From this theological base, we came to central Washington to discover how we, a group of economically and racially privileged youth living in comfortable suburban environments, can understand the needs of farm workers and advocate for their basic human rights. Our religious tradition and beliefs demand that we do not remain apathetic and complacent while others suffer. Our faith commands us to question relationships that create our comfort at the cost of other people's dignity. We are called by our faith to view farm workers as our brothers and sisters, to understand that their suffering is our responsibility because of our tacit approval of government policies that marginalize them, and our participation in market systems that deny them the opportunity to earn livable wages. Through this project, we reached an understanding that the only way to truly call ourselves Unitarian Universalists is to not only affirm the values stated above but to actively promote them through just actions. We have realized that promoting these values is not limited to our own actions; it applies to the policies of our government, the behavior of our communities, and the actions of corporations and organizations within them.

Therefore, we are obligated by our beliefs to broadcast the voices and stories of the most disenfranchised people within Washington State. It is not our intention to solve all farm workers' problems, but it is our responsibility to bring the voices and stories of the farm worker to our communities, communities that are at the very least tacitly responsible for creating the conditions in which farm workers live.

## *Voices of the Farm Workers*

### AN OUTLINE OF THE ISSUE

The issue of farm workers' human rights is complicated. The farm workers' plight covers a complex array of issues, including health care, labor-management relations, market systems, immigration policy, race relations, state and federal regulation, education, and housing. We found no general formula to help the well-being of all farm workers, because each person has his or her unique needs. Farm workers can be separated into two basic categories: residents who live in a community year-round and attempt to find other forms of employment during non-agricultural months, and migrants who come to Washington for work only during the harvest, thinning, and pruning seasons. Further dividing these categories are groups of single men who are looking to make money to bring back to their families in Mexico at the seasons' end, and families who live and travel together. For each group, housing, economic, and health needs are dramatically different.

### NARRATIVES: THE PERSONAL STORIES

Progress in the efficiency, acreage, and exports in Washington State's agriculture overshadows the problems of the people who tend and harvest the crops. Many farm workers endure dangerous and unsanitary living conditions. To illustrate this problem, we will describe an average farm worker home.

Upon first glance at the squalid trailer park, one is overwhelmed by an enormous sense of despair. Beer bottles are scattered about the unkempt yard. Chipped paint decorates the small home. Rusted-out cars, no longer functioning, sit in the dirt and gravel driveway. The smell of sewage is present long before approaching the trailer. Many times, adequate sewer systems and septic tanks break, and landlords do little to alleviate the situation.

Venturing into the home reveals greater problems. While unidentifiable food decays in the corner, the drone of flies competes with the mumbling of an ancient radio. Typically, fly screens are either broken or nonexistent. Refrigerators are not provided, and thus virtually unattainable. The thick heat seems to swallow the residents. Air conditioners are rare and extremely valuable commodities. The inhabitants forget ordinary duties such as preparing dinner or cleaning the home in their search for relief from the sweltering mid-July temperatures.

Farm workers live and work in conditions that most Americans believe do not occur in their nation. They experience conditions reminiscent of those before the turn of the last century, before child labor and minimum wage laws. They work seven days a week, 10 to 11 hours a day, for a small wage that can barely feed their family and pay the expensive rent on their inadequate and home.

That is a broad generalization of the farm worker experience. During the process of interviewing farm workers in the Mattawa area, we heard some stories that we believe illustrate common experiences among farm workers.

Twelve single men from Chiapas, ranging in age from 16 to 40, crossed the Mexican border "the way everyone else does," hoping to spend the season in Mattawa earning money for their families by working in nearby orchards. When we met them, they had been camping alongside the Columbia River on land owned by the Grant County public utilities district for six days. They slept in a small tent, the

back of a van, and upon the ground. They had no cooler or other means of refrigeration. A half-full egg carton sat open on the ground. A small fire pit covered by a pot resembling a wok served as a stove. They utilized the nearby state-provided outhouses and garbage cans. They bathed in the river. To obtain water, they begged at houses in Mattawa. Most residents allowed them to use a garden hose to fill the plastic water containers the food bank gave them. They spend their days with a 'friend,' who drives them around the area searching for work. Since they arrived at a lull in the picking season, their search has been unsuccessful. At home in Mexico, people told them that work is well paid and easy to find in the United States. They acted cheerful during our conversation, but we could tell that they are beginning to lose hope. They complained that the river rose a few days ago and flooded their camp. The river was rising again. They also complained about the wind. A cloud of insects and dust swirled in the air. They asked us to give them copies of the pictures we took so they could show their wives their "hotel." As we left, one of them asked if we could give them food, clothing, or money.

**Francisco Sanchez**, a single man in his 50s, had been living in a shack constructed of plywood, cardboard, and a blue plastic tarp along the Columbia River for six weeks. The river was rising, quickly approaching his home. He was beginning to construct a new residence a few feet farther up the bank, alongside his garden. He was proud to tell us how he grew tomatoes and cucumbers in the hard clay soil of the riverbank. Ants devoured his asparagus. His attempts to kill them with pesticides proved unsuccessful. He spends his winters in Yakima and has migrated to Mattawa every summer for the past three years. When we spoke with him, he was searching for work with little success. He uses the state-supplied outhouses and garbage cans. He cooks over an open fire, typically chicken or beef. He dined on bologna sandwiches the day we spoke with him. He bathes with a Sun Shower, the type used by campers and sailors. For water, he begs the residents of Mattawa or uses the spigot in the city park there. He hitchhikes to go places, but cannot carry anything with him when he does. People fear that anything he carries might be a weapon, so they will not give him a ride. He visits the hospital in Yakima, but only for emergencies. Mr. Sanchez does not want to bother the doctors. He greatly enjoys his solitary lifestyle. When we mentioned the Esperanza housing project, he responded negatively, stating that he was afraid of the drinking and stealing that occurred there.

He is also afraid of the Immigration and Naturalization Service taking him away in the middle of the night while he sleeps. He did not mind being deported (which happened to him 19 years ago); he hates waiting in a cell until the INS has caught enough people to transport a full load back to Mexico. He once had documentation to work for six months in the United States, but lost it when his wallet was stolen. He did not obtain new documents then because he was not planning to return to the U.S. He decided to come back because he has grandchildren nearby in Sunnyside. He did not have many needs — only a cooler, over-the-counter medicine, a gas grill, and the documents needed to work legally in the U.S. We were not the first group to ask him questions. He hoped that our work would bring results; the other interviewers had not.

**Amelia** is in first grade and homeless. To escape the heat, she was sitting in the shade of a mobile home in the Riverview Trailer Park. She has lived in Georgia, but likes it more in Mattawa. She has only two pairs of clothes; one is borrowed from a neighbor. She enjoys school and likes to read, but has not been able to go to school since she moved to Washington. She travels with her parents and her older brothers. They sleep wherever they can. Right now they are staying with family or friends, she was not sure which. When they have no one to stay with, they sleep in their car.

**Maria**, a woman in her 30s, holding the hand of her young son, approached us as we walked through the Riverview Trailer Park because she wanted someone to relay her story to as many people as possible. She lives in half of a mobile home with two other adults and two children. She has lived in her home for five problem-filled years. Her stove spews fire. Her toilet, sinks, refrigerator, and hot water do not function properly. She takes her children to a neighbor's home to bathe. Her sewer system is malfunctioning, but not as badly as it was a few years ago. Her children used to play among the puddles of raw sewage that spotted the ground around their home. She has complained to the landlord, but he claimed that he did not have time to solve her problems. He promptly increased her rent. She is refusing to pay until her home functions properly again. For each day her rent is late, the landlord charges a one-dollar fine. Maria called the State Department of Health, but they said they are too busy to investigate possible code violations.

**Blanca**, a 19-year-old woman, distinguished herself from the other people we had spoken with the first time she smiled. Her grin revealed braces, betraying her family's comparatively high income. She was spending her summer vacation visiting her brother and his family in Desert Aire, a small community near Mattawa. The four members of her brother's family have lived in the area for four years. They live 20 feet from an orchard in a trailer that they own. The grower lets them park in a gravel lot alongside the orchard for free. They have constructed a fairly large porch beside their front door. The grower provided a bathroom facility with ten stalls and two large dishwashing sinks. The family uses a propane stove in their trailer and a barbecue outside. A satellite dish sits behind their home. They use the medical clinic in Othello. Blanca is unhappy here. She is lonely because there is no one her age and her brother's home is isolated. She wanted to go to school in the area to learn English, but none of the schools would accept her because she is too old. She spoke a little English, which she learned from an instructional video. She occasionally works in the field with her brother. She is looking forward to returning to Mexico to continue studying communications at a university.

Baby chickens were running loose in the living room and kitchen of **Mrs. Placido's** trailer. Two six- or seven-year-old children slept together on one of two beds in the living room. Mrs. Placido, a middle-aged woman, has been in the Mattawa area for the last year since she and her family left Mexico in search of work. Her children had just returned from ten hours of cherry picking. The family needs extra income, because she is not able to work. Several months ago, she was in a car accident and injured her back. Even though the accident was not her fault, the other driver's insurance would not pay for her rehabilitation, because of her undocumented status. She was able to receive medical care at the farm worker clinic and recovered from the accident. While she was injured, her husband was the sole provider for the family, earning an average of \$5.75 an hour when he could find work. Unfortunately, a few weeks after she healed enough to work again, she had another accident. A set of steps inside her former trailer was decaying and the landlord refused to repair them. As she walked up the stairs one day, they broke. She fell and reinjured her back. The clinic was unable to help her. She has been unable to work for the past seven months. She soon began telling us about the living conditions in her old trailer, which was located a few blocks from her current home. The landlord turned off the connection from the toilet to the sewage system, attempting to force the residents to move out after her accident. Since the family had already paid that month's rent and had no savings with which to pay rent elsewhere, they remained in the trailer. They used the toilet until sewage began to spill over the bowl and onto the floor. They mopped the sewage up with old clothes, attempting to mask the smell. Soon, a pot in the living

room began serving as their toilet. They emptied it under the trailer. They did not complain about the landlord or the living situation because they were scared of being deported or incarcerated. After we left, our interpreter who works at Migrant Head Start told us that one of Mrs. Placido's children, who was enrolled in Head Start, contracted intestinal parasites at about the same time as the sewage problem in the old trailer.

Two families, totaling seven people, currently live in Mrs. Placido's trailer. They pay \$490 dollars a month for the four-room trailer. The current landlord also bills them \$190 a month for electricity, a figure Mrs. Placido thought reasonable, but seemed absolutely ludicrous to us, considering that she used no electricity during our visit in the early evening.

The Placido family wants to buy a home, but they were told that they could not buy a house or trailer because they are undocumented. One of her children is experiencing similar struggles. Her adult daughter, who has a family of her own, wants to move into the trailer with Mrs. Placido because she was recently evicted from a grower-owned camp. The family is camping by the river and cannot move into the trailer because the landlord will not allow more occupants in the unit. She also had a nineteen-year-old daughter in Mexico who recently died in a car accident. She said she wanted to attend the funeral, but could not afford the trip. When asked if she prefers the U.S. to Mexico, she replied that there is no work in Mexico, but at least there she is truly free. As an undocumented worker in America, she says that she feels like a slave who cannot live her life as she pleases.

We met the **Garcia** family at the grower-owned trailer park at Rizzuti Farms, east of Mattawa. The rent was free for all of the families there, provided that they worked for the grower. The trailers appeared well-maintained. Each housed only one family. At the site we visited, there were three singlewide trailers as well as one doublewide trailer. The trailers were all within 25 feet of the fields.

The grower uses pesticides. When the Garcia family first arrived, pesticides hurt them visibly; everyone had red and runny eyes and noses. They have since become accustomed to the pesticides. The grower notifies them before spraying occurs. The women and children stay indoors; the men work in the fields. The Garcias wrap the baby in towels whenever their house is doused with poison. While they may be strong enough to withstand pesticides, the baby is not. Research has proven that long-term exposure to pesticide has detrimental effects. The Garcias will likely get sick more often and have an increased risk of cancer and other diseases later in life.

The family's living situation puts them at the grower's mercy. Since their rent is free, they lose the power to choose their home. A family cannot afford a house in a trailer park for the wages they receive. If they complain, they are evicted. Another family will move in, one less aware or more desperate. The grower has no legal obligation to respect the needs of the family.

We met nine single men living in a three-room dilapidated trailer covered with rust and dirt. During peak picking seasons, 15 to 20 men inhabit the trailer. For the past four years, all the men have ventured to Mattawa for picking seasons, returning each fall with money for their families. To maximize their earnings, they spend as little as possible on basic needs while here. The men have no beds, and minimal food and clothing. They eat just enough to sustain themselves. Garbage and a septic tank with frequent problems occupy the front yard. The cracked ceiling leaks during rainstorms. For their home, they paid a \$2,000 fee to their landlord at the beginning of the season and pay \$700 per month for rent, plus utilities. One inhabitant said he earns \$5.75 an hour, minimum wage, and works ten or more hours each day. For clothing, they travel the long distance to Sunnyside or Yakima because "it's cheaper

that way.” They purchase gasoline at nearby Shell or Texaco stations. When medical care is an absolute necessity, they go to Othello. The ideal housing for these men is “a house if at all possible.” Another man elaborated, slightly smiling, “Ideal housing is just not possible. Most people are lacking hope,” he concluded.

When the Esperanza housing project opened, Ramón became one of its first tenants, leaving his riverside campsite. He shares his new dormitory-like house, made of a converted shipping container, with three men, most of whom plan to take money back to their families in Mexico. He recently separated from his wife; a situation, he said, that is uncommon in Mexican culture. His new home seemed luxurious compared with his previous situation. His former house consisted of a tarp and some boxes. Ramón was very happy about his housing change. His latest employment has been picking apricots.

Ramón’s eyes were extremely bloodshot. At first we dismissed the problem and pretended not to notice; however, Ramón brought it up in conversation. He thought that pesticides had caused it. His eyes had been like that since February. (We visited him on July 16). He had once visited a doctor to get medicine, but he left because the doctor had asked too many questions. He was afraid of deportation.

## *THE ISSUES*

In compiling this report, we classified the issues facing farm workers into six broad categories. In each section, there is a brief discussion of the problems that farm workers face, followed by a series of possible solutions that we support. The categories are: housing and living, health care, children's issues, immigration, worker and grower relations, and economic issues.

### HOUSING

Farm worker housing has long been a severe problem in the state of Washington, primarily affecting the migrant farm worker population. It is evident that current housing for these laborers is both inadequate and extremely scarce. A 1999 policy brief from Governor Gary Locke stated that more than 37,000 migrant workers in Washington lack housing during the growing season and another 120,000 seasonal workers and their dependents live in inadequate houses. Depending on the population it is intended to serve, housing is either built to seasonal or year-round codes. These codes are violated when seasonal housing is used year-round due to a shortage of other options.

There have been major obstacles in the promotion of safe, sanitary, and healthy housing. Many facilities lack adequate sewer systems. Some systems are broken or improperly installed due to poor landlord maintenance. With raw sewage too often surfacing in yards and streets, it is not surprising that diseases such as giardia and intestinal parasites are a constant threat to people's health.

The hot summers that make central Washington such prime agricultural land cause additional problems for the workers who tend the land. One challenge is the lack of refrigeration. When summer temperatures top 100 degrees, all perishable food will spoil rapidly without refrigeration. Almost all food will attract flies; without fly screens guarding the doors, extremely uncomfortable living conditions occur. The heat brings unpleasant situations, especially when air conditioning is not available in the homes. Sometimes, small fans are present, but usually they are provided at the residents' expense. Small mobile homes become unbearably hot, forcing residents outdoors.

Water, the most basic essential to human life, is often not available inside the home. This inconvenience forces occupants to seek water elsewhere. Some farm workers obtain their water at the spigot in the city park in Mattawa. Others receive their water at the cost of humiliation; they beg door-to-door in Mattawa to use residents' garden hoses to fill their buckets. In some situations where migrants are forced to live by the river, the contaminated Columbia is the only available water source.

Living expenses can rapidly consume a monthly paycheck. While most laborers work approximately 10-11 hours a day seven days a week when they are employed, their earnings usually do not top minimum wage. Workers often use check-cashing services, whose fees can take up to ten percent of their already meager earnings. The average trailer or apartment costs around \$700 per month, sometimes with the added price of electricity and parking. With these rates, the monthly housing bill can easily surpass the costs of a decent urban apartment.

While farm workers pay incredible prices for substandard housing, they usually have no help from their landlords in improving conditions. Even for small things such as replacing a broken door hinge, or repairing a wobbly step, it may prove impossible to get landlord assistance. Often, landlords violate major health codes because they know that their tenants' fear of deportation prevents them from seeking any recourse.

Due to the oftentimes unavoidable exploitation by landlords, some migrant workers, mostly

single men, choose to live alongside the Columbia River. Farm workers usually make this decision in order to pocket all wages, in hopes of aiding their families remaining in Mexico. Other inexpensive housing options may include sleeping in cars, trucks, tents, cardboard shacks, vans, trees, and orchards.

One might believe that state park campgrounds could be a plausible alternative to the previously listed living situations, but these parks are unavailable. State park campgrounds prioritize their campers in the middle of the picking seasons. The 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend is a prime example. At this critical time in the cherry harvest, many migrant families desperately need a legal place to pitch their tents. Yet, campgrounds turn them away to provide space for pricey ski boats and extravagant RVs.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Through much observation and discussion, we have created recommendations for future improvements to migrant housing. Among these are health department “check-ups” with a two-month improvement time period, tax break incentives for new housing construction, increased food and clothing drives, and promoting the use of off-site non-grower owned, OSHA and WISHA approved tents and trailers for short-term and emergency housing solutions.

A check-up system would allow time for necessary improvements to be carried out by the landlords, decreasing the amount of homelessness. Presently, when health department officials evict people from their homes, they give the farm workers five-day hotel vouchers. After these vouchers expire, workers have no place to live. Consequently, hundreds become homeless. This process does not solve problems, it only creates more. When a home is determined to be below standard, the health department should allow a two-month ‘grace period’ for the landlord to meet the standards. This procedure would prevent more people from losing their homes.

Tax break incentives should be used to entice private investors to build high quality housing for farm workers. At this time, there is not enough housing for the farm workers of rural Washington. By encouraging new construction, more people would have homes and rental rates at existing facilities would decrease, due to increased competition. Creating more housing would help alleviate the problem of exorbitant monthly rents.

There is a definite need for more food and clothing among the migrant worker population. Encouraging the organization of food and clothing drives is a simple way in which many people could contribute to easing the shortage.

By promoting the use of off-site, non-grower owned, OSHA and WISHA approved tents and trailers for short-term and emergency situations, the inexcusable homelessness that is abundant today could be alleviated. Tents are not a permanent solution. They should be for people in the area for short seasons or people who have recently lost their home and need a place to stay until they can find a new home.

## HEALTH

There is a severe lack of stable and accessible health care for migrant farm workers in Washington State. Although some services are available to the farm workers, they are rarely adequate. We have witnessed dire situations in which individuals experienced great health risks due to a variety of problems including an inability to go to free clinics, purchase medicine, and maintain proper personal hygiene due to their living situation. The following is a list of the health problems, needs, and demands of the migrant laborers.

There is a serious shortage of sufficient restroom and bathing facilities, which forces families to use unsanitary methods. Some people store their waste in buckets, sometimes letting it sit near their home for an entire day before disposing of it. Others employ the same patch of river as both a toilet and shower. The causes of this unhealthy situation include nonexistent or unsanitary bathroom facilities and a lack of potable water. Many people who realize the disease potential in drinking river water obtain their water at a spigot in a park in Mattawa or by begging to use residents' hoses to fill up a bucket or two. Despite these common precautions, entire families frequently are in direct contact with unsanitary water, increasing the potential for infection and illness.

Following miners, agricultural workers have the highest frequency of on-the-job injuries. Workers picking apples, cherries, pears, and other tree fruit use three-legged ladders. Improper or untrained handling of the hard-to-manage tool can cause falls, producing serious back or limb injuries. Years of the repetitive wrist-twisting motion necessary to pick fruit manifests itself in carpal tunnel and other repetitive stress syndromes. In addition to the physical risks, many laborers and families, especially those that live near fields, risk exposure to pesticides that can cause rashes, infections, poisonings, or long-term detrimental effects.

Inherent in the American system of agricultural work is the frequent migration of single men. To serve their needs, there is typically a large population of prostitutes in farming communities. Sexually transmitted diseases are common. Nancy Foote, Medical Director at the Yakima Valley Farm workers Clinic, estimated that 50percent of the prostitutes in the area have HIV. The highly migratory nature of the worker population ensures that sexually transmitted diseases will spread to the communities that many men return to after the season ends.

The large variety of physical risks is magnified by the inaccessibility of proper medical facilities experienced by farm workers. Clinics are often distant enough to require a laborer to miss an entire day of work to attend an appointment. Due to the highly seasonal and temporary nature of agricultural employment, for most workers, missing one day's earnings is a huge financial sacrifice. Consequently, many farm workers do not visit clinics during periods of employment.

Few cars and a poor public transportation system present additional difficulties to sick or injured individuals. The act of traveling to the clinic is a struggle in itself. Frequently, workers from several families share a vehicle. In these cases, medical visits must be coordinated with several schedules, making them practically impossible. Other obstacles to medical care include language barriers, feeling uncomfortable with the doctor, and undocumented workers' fear of deportation.

In many communities, people are uninformed of the free clinics. Many individuals we interviewed did not know that there were clinics nearby. Only a small percent know the locations, hours, and services provided by their local medical facility.

Medical services for women and children are especially deficient. Women experience great difficulty obtaining proper prenatal care and birth control. The state does provide free transportation vouchers for prenatal visits, but these are infrequently used. Additionally, clinics provide substandard education about domestic abuse and drug and alcohol addiction.

Even when farm workers visit a clinic, they do not receive the best care possible, due to their lack of medical insurance. If doctors in private clinics saw farm workers' injuries and illnesses, those physicians would not hesitate to recommend visits to specialists or prescriptions for expensive drugs. Employees of farm worker clinics do not use those options because they realize that their patients cannot afford those services. This situation results in the workers receiving mediocre medical care.

A widely ignored part of health care for migrant workers is mental health care. Despite rates of bipolar disorders, anxiety disorders, and clinical depression well above the rate for the general population's, there are no screenings for these mental illnesses among workers. The clinics are more concerned with physical ailments, so they give patients' mental health little concern. The nearest mental health facility to Mattawa is in Moses Lake, approximately 50 miles away.

The existing health care facilities do not adequately serve the large numbers of farm workers who live in the Mattawa area. They have many needs that cannot be met using the procedures that are standard in most medical facilities. Medical clinics and service providers need to change their practices in order to meet the needs of the migrant and resident farm worker communities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The best way to alleviate the health problems of farm workers is to institute a socialized health care system in Washington State. This system would not be solely for farm workers; it would provide free health care for all people whose incomes fall below the poverty line. This system would cover all forms of health care: general, mental, dental, prenatal, and emergency. Health care is a preventative measure that would save the state money over time. When people are able to see doctors, dentists, and other health care professionals regularly, they are less likely to have serious emergencies or expensive long-term health problems.

Under our proposed system, general health care would be supplied primarily in local clinics that are already government funded, and in newly constructed clinics in areas that have inadequate or nonexistent service. Private clinics would also be available to people on the system to ensure them the options that middle-class Americans take for granted. These clinics would serve all people on the socialized health care system. Steps must be taken to fulfill the needs found only in farm worker populations as well.

To serve farm workers who live in rural areas and are unable to go to the nearest town for doctor visits, clinics need to be located in areas that are easily accessible to workers and their families. The clinics should be open at times when workers are not in the fields. Instead of operating from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., the hours should shift later in the day, remaining open after people return from the fields. That would allow workers and their families to receive medical attention without forfeiting wages.

Another possible farm worker-specific health program would involve mobile health care clinics, staffed by people who can take care of general needs, providing services to people with no transportation. These mobile clinics would make visits among the neighborhoods and camp sites inhabited by farm workers. Mobile units would ensure adequate health for all members of the migrant and resident farm worker communities.

To serve the health care necessities of farm workers' children, doctors and dentists should make regular visits to schools and Head Start centers. One mission of this program would be to give the children a regular check-up. Another would be to teach classes on health and personal hygiene to emphasize basic principles of personal care among the children of farm workers.

The health clinics need to be more responsive to the needs of women and children. A small investment now would save the state and federal government much more in the future. Most of the children of farm workers are citizens of the U.S., eligible for all government assistance programs. Additionally, shelters that give women and children a safe and stable place to escape abusive relationships should be expanded and constructed. Existing facilities must be promoted, to ensure that women know

of the services available to them.

Regardless of the facilities available to the workers, one of the most important aspects of any health program is informing the population it is designed to serve. For mobile health care centers, fliers could be distributed a few days before the clinic arrives in a neighborhood. Since a high percentage of the farm worker population is illiterate, word of mouth would be the most effective way of informing people who have just arrived in the area that there are services available for them. Each service should promote the others to its clientele. A joint effort between all people concerned with the issue of farm workers' health is the only strategy that will guarantee a higher standard of health among the workers.

## CHILDREN

Poverty hurts children, regardless of their parents' occupation. Their parents cannot afford the food, clothing, or shelter necessary for an ideal childhood. Since their parents are less likely to have graduated from high school, poor children are not as strongly encouraged to pursue their education.

The unique lifestyle of farm workers causes their children to suffer in ways which other poor children do not. The American system of agriculture promotes a lifestyle of low incomes, substandard living conditions, pesticide exposure, and frequent migrations for its employees, greatly harming the farm workers' children.

Despite its prohibition, child labor continues to occur in the fields. The piece-rate wages paid by many growers subtly encourages farm workers to bring their children to work to supplement the family's earnings. Children as young as six harvest crops alongside their parents. Many growers seem unconcerned with children working. Some even reminisce on the days when child labor was legal. Lon Inaba, an owner of Inaba Farms, stated that "*The kids thought it was like playing, like sitting in their yard . . . they picked just as much as adults . . . it's good for them. Since child labor ended, there has been an increase in crime, drug use, and gangs.*" A society that is disgusted by the thought of children working in factories condones child farm labor as something safe and wholesome, ignoring injurious farm equipment, poisoning pesticides, and the disruption to the children's education.

Health problems are a too common occurrence among children of farm workers. At the Migrant Head Start, an educational program for young children and their parents, there are frequent outbreaks of lice, chicken pox, parasites, and other illnesses. These health problems do not stay isolated among the children. They bring them home and spread them throughout their families. Children who work in the fields or live near them are particularly susceptible to pesticide poisonings, typically appearing as rashes and other skin irritations, although long-term serious illnesses occur as well.

The migratory nature of many farm worker families prevents normal development. Teachers at Head Start notice that the young children have difficulty adjusting to new locations, which manifests itself in low self-esteem and behavior problems. Camping along the river hurts children as well. Along with an increased risk for disease and parasites, their classmates exclude them because of their poor hygiene. The lack of privacy at home causes them to be very shy among the other children. Their minimal accommodations lead them to be overwhelmed and overstimulated when they attend Head Start or school.

Constant moving hinders children's schooling. Incompatible curriculum creates incomplete education among children who move frequently. U.S. history and other subjects are taught in different grades throughout the state and along the West Coast. By not spending more than a few months in any location, the children of migrant workers most likely learn some lessons many times while skipping

others altogether. This haphazard education gives these children a significantly smaller knowledge base than their resident peers.

Despite all of the struggles farm workers face, both parents usually manage to stay involved in their children's lives. The percentage of single-parent families is small. Of the 140 families served by Mattawa's Migrant Head Start program, Carmen Hernandez, a family service worker, could not think of more than 10 families headed by only one parent. At the resident Head Start center in nearby Sunnyside, the ratio of single parent families ranges from half to three-quarters, depending on the year. Both parents participate in their children's education by attending teacher conferences together. Rosa Granados, the head teacher, stated that parents continually express their excitement that their children are learning English and receiving a good education.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Many of the problems of migrant workers are difficult to solve because they are tied to the migrant lifestyle. Poor hygiene, disease, and the struggle to adjust to a new location will plague the children as long as the current system of agriculture exists. A few changes can be made, though, that will greatly improve their situation.

To allow children of migrant farm workers to receive educations equivalent to their resident peers, the school curriculum should be coordinated along the West Coast. Matching textbooks or lesson plans are unnecessary; all that is required is a commitment to teach the same subjects in the same grades throughout the western states. While this unification would be most beneficial to migrant children, it would prevent all children who move between school districts the frustration and boredom caused by repeating lessons.

Most agricultural communities provide few activities for young people. Youths' boredom can lead to high-risk behaviors that damage the quality of life for all of the community's residents. Communities and the state should invest in a youth center to provide young people with a safe place to study, play, and spend time with their friends. A small investment now would prevent large incarceration, drug treatment, and foster care costs in the future.

## ECONOMIC ISSUES

A driving force behind the low wages and poor working conditions experienced by farm workers is international competition in the produce market. The recent strength of the dollar decreases the ability of domestic farms to export crops and lowers the price of imported produce within the United States. Foreign farms do not need to adhere to the relatively high wage and safety standards of the US. Lower production costs permit them to sell their produce to multinational food distributors more cheaply, requiring American farmers to cut costs to compete and survive. Those cuts are usually in the services and wages provided for farm workers. Even at supermarkets in the Yakima Valley, foreign crops are often cheaper than food grown locally. With more acres worldwide being developed for agriculture, these trends should only become more severe. Many small farmers are stopping production or selling their farms to large corporations because they cannot make a sufficient profit. Some growers expect all of the Yakima Valley farms to be owned by less than ten people or corporations within the next 20 years.

As is the case in many other industries, independent and locally owned grocery stores are losing market share to large corporate chain stores. That shift has caused the dominance of a few large food distributors and retailers. Their oligarchic practices exempt them from the laws of supply and demand.

Consumers have few options, so they often tolerate the 300 percent markup that retailers make on wholesale prices. These corporations' demands for larger profits, aligned with increased competition among growers, drive growers' profits down, often so low that it is not efficient to harvest crops at all. Too often, growers let their crops rot in the field to cut their losses.

Lon Inaba, a grower on the Yakima reservation, explained his tenuous situation. He sells boxes of corn for four dollars. The box itself costs \$1.25. That leaves only \$2.75 to cover planting, growing, picking, and packing costs. There are few spare dollars for providing livable wages for the farm workers. Workers are the unfortunate victims of the increasingly global economy and its produce profiteers.

The federal government withdraws money to pay for Social Security from every paycheck any worker receives. For most of us, it is not too troubling because we believe we will receive those funds upon our own retirement. That is not the case for farm workers. Since most use forged Social Security cards to obtain employment, they are paying into a system from which they will never reap benefits. The federal government has millions of dollars deducted from farm workers' pay checks that will never be repaid.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The key to improving farm workers' situation is increased consumer awareness. People must realize that human hands picked the fruits and vegetables populating the produce aisle at their local grocery store. Their purchase is the culmination of a season-long, frequently global process. Americans must realize that their low food prices, cheapest in the industrialized world, are borne on the backs of cheap and exploited labor, whether the farm workers toil in the US or abroad.

Once consumers realize the origins of their meals, they can begin to change their purchasing habits. We recommend that people purchase organic produce. That simple act discourages growers from the irresponsible and dangerous practice of pesticide use. Another way to consume responsibly is through the purchase of produce certified by The Food Alliance, an organization composed of growers that commits to protecting clean drinking water, conserving soil, reducing pesticide use, preserving open space, and strengthening rural communities. Produce grown by a member of The Food Alliance has a sticker with TFA-Approved printed on it. It is available throughout the Pacific Northwest.

To reduce the monopolistic power of agribusiness, consumers should frequent independent markets, food co-operatives, farmers' markets, and the seasonal produce stands that appear every picking season. By avoiding large chain supermarkets, the food distributor is eliminated or reduced, allowing growers to receive a larger percentage of the retail price.

To further stop the exploitative practices of large food distributing and retailing corporations, people should divest of them. By selling one's stock in a company, individuals express their disagreement with the current state of agriculture that allows distributors to reap tremendous profits at the expense of growers who barely remain in business and of workers who struggle to survive.

## GROWER AND WORKER RELATIONS

All decisions concerning farm workers' conditions involve growers. Even though the farm workers' labor benefits the grower, many of the growers' actions affect their employees negatively. Food retailers and distributors, job safety, and legal maneuverings affect the situation. Policies must be enacted to benefit the farm worker until a decent standard of living becomes the norm.

In addition to the growers' struggles in the realm of national and international economics, the

relationships between growers and their employees have many problems. Growers often fail to treat their farm workers as people. Bob Ingham, a grower we spoke with, referred to his workers as “a commodity.” Though many factors contribute to this, the primary one is the immensity of most farms. When the grower employs hundreds of people, it is easy to dehumanize the workers. Farm workers become as precious as shovels, tractors, and hoes; their treatment reflects their low value. Language and culture differences between white growers and Mexican workers complicate the relationship, never to the advantage of the farm workers.

Most growers do not feel responsible to provide housing, transportation, and insurance to their employees. Since many farm workers are willing to work for only a meager salary, there is no incentive for a grower to provide any benefits. Mike Gempler, President of the Washington Growers League, asserts that “*No other non-skilled labor-intensive industry is held to this sort of standard. Kindercare pays their employees even less than the average grower does, and they don't provide housing, transportation, or insurance.*” Most growers refuse to provide farm workers, even full-time year round employees, with basic benefits such as retirement, overtime, childcare, and dental and health insurance. Undocumented workers who use false Social Security numbers to obtain employment will never see any of the money deducted from their paycheck.

Many growers have tried to provide some form of housing, varying from permanent housing to emergency tent sites. On numerous occasions, growers made large investments into these projects only to learn the projects do not meet state and local standards and are therefore uninhabitable. Housing standards change daily, with each government agency, interest group, and political party advancing its own agenda. This causes confusion among growers about building standards. Due to a plethora of regulations and conflicting messages, many growers who were originally willing to provide housing will not construct any at all.

The hazards to which growers expose farm workers demonstrate a lack of concern for their employees. Farm workers' constant exposure to pesticides creates a serious health risk. Pesticide exposure is most dangerous over a long period of time, or to small children. Though laws exist that specify waiting and re-entry times into pesticide-sprayed fields, many of those rules are not observed by farm workers or growers. Even if these re-entry times are observed, there is no evidence that those measures would preserve the long-term health of many workers, as the half-life of pesticides can reach a month or longer. Few extended studies have been performed on most pesticides due to their recent introduction and the large influence of pesticide corporations among the scientific community.

Another long-term health risk in all types of labor-intensive occupations is a short working career. Due to the physical demands of agricultural labor, most farm workers are unable to work as long as employees in other fields. Most tasks in farming are extremely labor-intensive. Often, farm workers bend over or perform a repetitive motion continuously for over 60 hours a week during certain picking seasons. In addition to these long-term health risks, agriculture is a high-accident industry. Working with sharp knives and ladders during seasons where crops need to be picked in a specific amount of time leads to haste and carelessness, causing accidents.

The glut of farm workers in Washington lowers wages. The current oversupply of laborers allows growers to pay their employees minimum wage or less because there is a huge number of farm workers willing to work for very little. Much of the blame for this oversupply of labor can be attributed to the growers for continually advertising in the southern U.S. that Washington needs more farm workers. There are more than enough farm workers during most seasons without bringing more laborers into

Washington. This oversupply is most apparent in the winter, because there is not much agricultural employment. During this time, farm workers either migrate to different areas in the U.S. where there is work, or return to Mexico to visit family and tend their own fields. Others remain in the northwest even though they do not work.

Transportation is a major problem because many farm workers cannot afford a car. Public transportation helps in many areas to alleviate this problem but the current system is not large enough to adequately meet many communities' needs. Many farm workers charge each other outrageous fees for the daily drive to and from work. Average prices are around three to five dollars a day. Buses charge around one dollar a day to transport a worker to and from work.

The undocumented status of many farm workers causes problems as well. An employer of undocumented workers, non-English speaking workers, or workers who are unsure of their rights can easily exploit the situation. This is due to widespread misinformation among farm workers. Many fear that complaining can lead to deportation. There are few places where farm workers can easily access information on legal working conditions, their rights, and what to do about an exploitive employer. Even if they contact the right agency, the paperwork and long process are impractical for migrants who move to a new location every few months.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Because most farm workers are undocumented, and the agriculture industry does not have to deal in good faith with attempts at collective bargaining, most of these problems are difficult to solve. Both undocumented and non-unionized workers have little power to make demands of their employer. An additional problem occurs when an employer violates their employees' legal rights. Both non-unionized and undocumented workers have little opportunity for recourse. Altering laws so growers would have to bargain in good faith with farm workers' unions would make significant progress in solving many of the aforementioned problems. Furthermore, providing an adequate number of migrant workers legal entries into the country would subsequently help conditions both on and off the job. Growers would have no excuse for hiring illegal workers who would not complain. People would no longer remain silent about the human rights violations perpetrated by employers for fear of deportation. Instead, they could openly report all infringements on their rights to expanded and more responsive state Departments of Labor and Industry, Health, and WISHA.

One solution to providing work for the large number of jobless agricultural personnel during the winter is to plant a variety of crops that need tending and harvesting at different times during the year. This benefits both the workers and the growers. Workers will have jobs year-round, thus earning a better income, while growers will have a more stable workforce that works at one farm for several years instead of several months.

The best way to alleviate transportation problems would be for both growers and the government to provide transportation. A cooperation between city, county, and state government should commit to expanding the public transportation system. Additionally, growers must organize vanpools to stop in local communities or bus stations. It is outrageous that farm workers should pay over a tenth of their income just to get to and from work every day. Providing cheaper methods of transportation will give farm workers more money to spend on other necessities, such as housing, clothing, and health care.

## IMMIGRATION

Immigration is a complicated and politically divisive issue that the government and its citizens have attempted to address many times. The truth is that Americans need marginalized workers because no one else will do their jobs. During the Great Depression, Midwestern families who lost their farms ventured west in search of a better life. They found exploitive agricultural work paying meager wages barely adequate for their survival. In the 1960s, Hispanics from the southwest came to Washington and found the same situation. In the past 60 years, nothing has changed except the demographics of the agricultural workforce. Farm workers are now primarily undocumented immigrants from Mexico and Central America.

Throughout the United States' history, citizens have always felt threatened by immigrants. They fear stolen jobs and the outsiders' customs. Anti-immigrant sentiment has most recently manifested itself in California's Proposition 187 and Patrick Buchanan's proposed 'wall along the border.' As long as there are countries with problems worse than ours, immigrants, both documented and undocumented, will continue to enter our nation.

The recent crackdown on illegal immigration has only made border crossings more costly. People with hopes of agricultural work can pay thousands of dollars to "coyotes," or border guides, to cross the border. Increased patrols have only raised the costs of this illegal activity and moved the average crossing farther east, into the dangerous deserts of Eastern California and Arizona.

One method the government used in the past to curb undocumented immigration while maintaining a sufficient agricultural workforce was the guest worker program of the '40s. It was implemented to ensure ample farm production during the labor shortages of WW II. The program, an agreement between the Mexican and U.S. governments, gave a certain number of Mexican citizens visas to enter the U.S. for a season of agricultural work. To ensure that workers would not remain here once the season ended, a fraction of their wages was held at the border to be paid when the workers returned to Mexico. Often, these wages were never paid, even if the workers returned home.

In 1986, the U.S. government offered amnesty to all undocumented immigrants in hopes of legalizing the agricultural workforce. That was not the result. Once farm workers became legal residents, they quit their agricultural jobs in search of higher paying employment. This caused a demand for more farm workers and increased undocumented immigration.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Immigration is a complicated issue that we found few ways to resolve. A recommendation on which we could all agree was to oppose the reintroduction of the guest worker program. The program is indentured servitude. Preventing workers from receiving the full amount of their meager wages does not permit them an adequate living situation. Many farm workers cannot afford decent housing and other necessities on their full wage. Making earnings contingent on the workers' return to Mexico robs these individuals of any rights of self-determination. Governments withholding wages prevent them from living their lives as they choose.

## FUNDING

Many recommendations included in this report are expensive. We believe they are necessary to guarantee farm workers the standard of living that all people deserve. Deciding how to pay for these services was a discussion that consumed much of our time.

Originally, we wanted to tax large agribusinesses because we believe they are the ones profiting the most by the farm workers' labor. Devising a tax for them that consumers would not indirectly pay proved impossible. Since we could not create a method to tax the corporations, we shifted our focus to another group that benefits from farm workers' labor: the consumer.

We recommend that the State of Washington impose a tax on non-organic produce sold in supermarkets. We realize this is a highly regressive tax, but we devised no better solutions. In addition to raising funds to pay for health care and better housing for the farm workers, that tax would encourage consumers to buy organic produce or shop in non-corporate markets. It would not penalize local growers, as all produce sold in the state would be equally taxed.

To pay for federal programs for the farm workers, we suggest that the government use the Social Security funds that farm workers will never receive due to forged documentation. Farm workers have paid millions of dollars into the system; they should be able to see some returns, just as everyone else who has money deducted from their pay checks.

## *A Call to Action – The Advocacy Plan*

Every recommendation made in this section is a direct result of weeks of interacting with different players in the farm workers' situation. We divided this section into three different pieces: advocacy plans for Unitarian Universalist youth groups in Washington, work for UU congregations in Washington, and plans for participants of the 1999 Just Works Yakima Farm worker Housing Workcamp to implement with their youth groups, congregations, and local communities.

### *Youth Groups:*

- Organize and contribute to clothing and food drives to be distributed to local farm workers or to be shipped to the Mattawa area.
- Write letters to local and state leaders urging them to take action to stop the exploitation of farm workers.
- Present workshops at social justice conferences, other local and national youth and all-ages conferences, and churches.
- Forge a working relationship between the young adult community and YRUU (Young Religious Unitarian Universalists) with a focus on social justice.
- Raise awareness with youth in their church and community
- Contribute to or create local social justice infrastructure in order to more easily communicate and organize.

### *Congregations:*

- Organize and contribute to clothing and food drives to be distributed to local farm workers or shipped to the Mattawa area.
- Write letters to local and state leaders urging them to take action to stop the exploitation of farm workers
- Boycott supermarkets and non-American grown produce.
- Divest from multinational food production and distribution corporations.

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- Organize and contribute to clothing and food drives to be distributed to local farm workers or shipped to the Mattawa area.
- Write letters to local and state leaders urging them to take action to stop the exploitation of farm workers
- Boycott supermarkets and non-American grown produce.
- Divest from multinational food production and distribution corporations.
- Contribute to medical and dental clinics for farm workers.
- Request board to pass resolution in support of UUSC work on migrant farm workers.
- Join or create interfaith organizations in local communities who will advocate for migrant farm workers' rights.
- Offer existing resources to local advocacy groups supporting migrant farm workers.

***Workcamp Participants:***

- Educate youth groups, congregations and local community.
- Present Sunday morning services about migrant farm worker issues for local congregations.
- Write articles about migrant farm worker issues for church newsletters, local papers and other media outlets.
- Create workshops addressing migrant farm worker issues for the PNWD's YRUU summer conference, fall conference, and social justice conference.

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**Work Camp Participants**

**Youth Participants**

Alex Bacon  
Benjamin Berres  
Alex Freeburg  
Travis Taylor  
Amelia Vader  
Caitlin Holt  
Laura Johnson  
Derek Newberry  
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**Chaplain**

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