

January 27, 2023

Esbey Hamilton, Vermont Migrant Education Program

Library Testimony

My name is Esbey Hamilton, and I lead Migrant Education Initiatives for the University of Vermont Extension. Our main funding is a Migrant Education Program grant from the federal Agency of Education, and with that grant we serve approximately 300 children and youth a year who are involved with temporary or seasonal agricultural work in Vermont. We also work very closely with the Migrant Health team, which provides healthcare access support to more than 700 individuals annually. There's a general association of the term "migrant farmworker" with workers coming from Mexico and Central America (or, in the case of apple harvesting, Jamaica). However, migratory agricultural workers can be from any country, and speak any language. That said, I am pretty much here to talk about workers from Mexico and Central America and their families.

I love libraries, and I was taught that libraries are safe spaces that exist in most communities where I can go to read, rest, work, and get information. Whenever I travel, I look for the library. This is part of my culture as a middle-class person from the northeastern US. It's not so much part of the culture of rural Mexico. Our staff works to teach youth and families about the services offered at their local libraries. When it makes sense, we meet program participants at the library – we read books, we use the internet to study for the GED, we attend story times with new parents and their kiddos. We find that without our taking people and showing them, sometimes several times, Mexican and Central American farmworkers aren't likely to visit the library or access library services on their own.

Here are some barriers that we see to migratory farmworkers from Mexico and Central American and their families accessing libraries:

Transportation: People can't get to the library because they don't have driver's licenses or cars, and live on farms which are outside of walking or biking distance.

Schedules: People can't get to the library because they work 12 hours a day, 6 days a week.

Lack of technology skills and quality home internet: People can't access (or even learn about) the wide range of online library services

Language: Many of the farmworkers we work with have very, very little English, especially when they first arrive. People don't think there's anything for them at the library, and they don't want to put themselves in situations where they will have to converse in English

Fear of being in public: Because of language and because of immigration status, many of the youth and families we work with experience very high levels of stress whenever they need to be in public, and want to allocate that stress to essential trips such as grocery shopping and medical care.

High mobility: Each library is different, and even if people get into visiting their local library, when they move, they have to get a whole new library card and learn a whole new building, staff, and schedule of events. Getting a library card is usually a very easy process, but it still requires, usually, interaction in English and proof of address, which can be very challenging. It's quite common for farmworkers to not

have ID and to not receive mail at home. Easy transfer of library cards between libraries would be helpful in these cases.

Opportunities:

Outreach focus especially in Franklin, Addison, and Orleans Counties where farmworking populations are high.

Outreach to young children and parents (21 pregnant people) – bilingual story time, but make sure that it's significantly attended by native Spanish speakers. I've heard from people who have attended these only to report back "but it was all white families, and everyone was speaking English!"

Collaborations with schools to allow children to learn about libraries and bring that information home to their parents.

Offer English classes outside of Chittenden County, ideally with Spanish-speaking instructors or support people. Because many dairy workers are undocumented, citizenship classes are less useful and can be alienating if they are aggressively marketed because farmworkers will feel that they need to disclose immigration status in order to explain why they aren't interested.

Offer computer instruction *in Spanish* and library staff knowledgeable about language functions on library computers. This includes helping folks access the Spanish-language GED instructional materials available through the library.

Relationships with individuals is key, not just for this population, but very much so for this population. Employ Spanish-speaking staff at libraries and support them doing personal outreach to farmworkers as part of their work. Text / audio outreach in Spanish is useful, but not if that language access is not there in the library. It can be worse if people show up to something because it was promoted to them in Spanish, but they get there and no one else is there who speaks Spanish. I would be happy to work with local libraries to share information and assist with making connections.