

Salud

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Once the grapes are ready, said Salud Event Coordinator Stephanie Buchanan, “the work doesn’t stop.”

“There is no work from home option for agricultural workers. They have no choice but to be out and be around others to continue to bring in income, to keep their housing, to put food on the table.”

COVID-19 risks for agricultural workers

Multiple coronavirus infection clusters in Oregon have been linked to agricultural and food-processing worksites. Among the state’s largest include one among workers harvesting fruit at Townsend Farms harvesting fruit and Fairview, another at Newport’s Pacific Seafood plants, and a third at Lamb Weston, a potato processor in Hermiston.

Vineyard workers, said Salud nurse Leda Garside, “have an advantage from other agricultural crops in that they are able to maintain social distancing at worksites.” But in the close quarters of indoor processing spaces, sorting and bottling lines included, she said “it’s a little more dicey.”

A factor that confounds contact tracing, agricultural workers don’t stick to one crop at one worksite. Someone who might be picking grapes. Some are likely picking blueberries now, or working at a nursery, then harvesting orchard fruit or Christmas trees.

Even if ag workers wear masks and can maintain distance at work, many rely on shared, sometimes employer-provided housing and transportation where it is difficult to maintain recommended distancing.

Agriculture impact of COVID-19

Agricultural communities across the US have been hard-hit by coronavirus, with major outbreaks associated with agricultural and processing operations in South Dakota, Florida, North Carolina and Washington.

Hispanic and Latinx people, the majority demographic of Oregon’s agricultural workforce, have been disproportionately impacted by coronavirus.

Of the state’s 12,406 positive cases, Hispanic people experienced 4,923 of them. That’s 37 percent of total infections, despite representing only 13 percent of Oregon’s population.

In response to the pandemic, OSHA, Oregon’s Occupational Safety and Health Administration, issued temporary rules requiring increased field sanitation measures and more stringent regulations of agricultural worker housing and transportation. The agency required farm employers to secure additional field sanitation units; hand-washing stations and portable restrooms.

In May, Governor Brown’s office, in collaboration with several state agencies, created the Food Security and Farmworker Safety Project, a \$30 million fund to increase coronavirus protections for agricultural workers during peak harvest season. Masks and 5,000 gallons of hand sanitizer were distributed at no cost, and millions in funds directed toward increasing safety in ag worker housing and transportation.

These initiatives are focused on prevention. Salud, which focuses on the wine industry, and similar mobile clinics operated by Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center, are working to address disparities in access to testing and care.

“The ag worker community was being hit particularly hard,” Buchanan said. “We knew that there were barriers to access before COVID, and they were amplified with the pandemic.”

Clinics adapt, prepare

During her Salud appointment at Bethel Heights Vineyard in the Eola-Amity Hills, Asuncion Martinez-Vasquez sat down at a table under glittering chandeliers in a space normally reserved for private tastings. In Spanish, physician assistant Lillian Navarro-Reynolds talked Martinez through her blood glucose and cholesterol screening.

Out on the winery’s deck, Garside waved over a patient from intake while Patty Robleto administered a COVID test in the tasting room.

With many area wineries open to guests exclusively on weekends and by appointment, Salud’s staff — clad in masks, face shields, gowns and gloves — have left their mobile clinic vans for winery tasting rooms. The move was necessary, explained Garside, to ensure staff and patients could maintain safe physical distances.

Since gaining access to testing equipment in May, Salud’s staff have screened more than 400 people for the virus. So far, the organization is seeing a 3.6 percent positive rate. It was higher when they first began testing in May, said Garside, but has since dropped; “having ongoing education and communication is helping.”

Salud’s COVID-19 testing is voluntary, not mandated by business owners, and 88 percent of patients have elected to be tested.

For ag workers, being tested repre-



Asuncion Martinez-Vasquez, a farmworker, listens as Erica Sanchez-Lerma reads results from a cholesterol and lipid test at Bethel Heights Vineyard.



Luis Campos Flores listens to instructions from Patty Robleto, with ¡Salud! Services, before receiving a COVID-19 test at Bethel Heights Vineyard near Salem, Oregon, on Tuesday, July 7, 2020. PHOTOS BY BRIAN HAYES / STATESMAN JOURNAL



Luis Campos Flores grimaces while receiving a COVID-19 screening at Bethel Heights Vineyard near Salem, Oregon, on Tuesday, July 7, 2020.



Lillian Navarro-Reynolds, PA, with ¡Salud! Services, prepares a COVID-19 nasal swab at Bethel Heights Vineyard near Salem, Oregon, on Tuesday, July 7, 2020.



Patty Robleto, with ¡Salud! Services, pricks Luis Campos Flores's finger to test lipid and cholesterol at Bethel Heights Vineyard near Salem, Oregon, on Tuesday, July 7, 2020.



The ¡Salud! Mobile health clinic truck is parked at Bethel Heights Vineyard near Salem, Oregon, on July. The clinic offers COVID-19 testing, information, outreach and other medical services to farmworkers.

sents some personal risk. Salud is required to report positive tests to state health officials and to their employer. Workers risked being removed from work, and associated financial losses that accompany quarantining.

Still, said Garside, “When we give test results it helps, whether negative or positive. They share the experience -- the test, it’s not as horrible as people describe it -- with other workers and with

family members.”

Garside hopes that by testing workers now, following up via text message, and providing ongoing support to those who test positive, will normalize testing and preventative practices to help workers in the industry’s busy months ahead.

“Harvest is coming and with that is an influx of people into the Valley,” Garside said. The wine harvest depends on

“interns, seasonal workers. We’re looking at how we gear up to help the industry safely get through what is go-time for them.”

Martinez-Vasquez, a full-time worker at Bethel Heights, said she isn’t afraid of COVID because of the precautions put in place at the winery, the commitment to wearing masks and social distancing.

“Growers have to make every effort to protect these workers,” Garside said, “because without the workers there’s no agriculture. They’re essential. They’re not disposable. Everybody needs to make a great effort to prevent this from spreading.”

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