



**Tito Vidales with ¡Salud! Services disinfects equipment at Bethel Heights Vineyard near Salem, Oregon, on Tuesday, July 7, 2020.** BRIAN HAYES / STATESMAN JOURNAL

## Farmworkers

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Americans for forced sterilization in the first half of the 20th century.

And, according to some advocates, the heightened anti-immigrant rhetoric and actions of the Trump administration contributed to the mistrust.

Maria Elena Guerra, executive director of Farmworker Housing Development Corporation, a Woodburn-based nonprofit that runs affordable housing complexes for farmworkers in the Mid-Valley, said her organization confronts mistrust of governmental and medical institutions among farmworkers.

“The previous administration terrorized people to the point of, ‘Politicians just want to kill us,’” Guerra said.

If they are undocumented, farmworkers may also be hesitant to fill out vaccine forms with personal information, she said. An estimated 37% of farmworkers nationwide are undocumented, according to the most recent National Agricultural Workers Survey.

“Their biggest concern is, ‘Are they going to track me down?’” Guerra said.

The best strategy to help people overcome these barriers has been advocacy workers, health promoters and neighbors sharing their own vaccine stories, Guerra said, which in some cases can require two to three hour-long conversations.

Vera said they have also found that a personal connection is key.

“We have to adjust our times and availability to come to them,” he said.

A few weeks ago, Juarez conducted a rapid assessment of 500 farm and food processing workers in Morrow and Umatilla counties, and learned about 40% of people surveyed were not vaccinated.

Those who were hesitant said a persuasive factor was seeing more trusted community members share their vaccine experiences, which is especially important in rural areas often lacking bilingual and bicultural health care providers, Juarez said.

“They’re far away from Salem and Portland, and they want to see their own providers say the vaccine is ok,” Juarez said. “We realized we need to do more of this and go door-to-door and talk to people.”

### ‘Think of your children’

Throughout the pandemic, Latinos have represented a disproportionate share of COVID-19 cases, which experts have attributed in part to systemic factors such as Latinos being overrepresented in essential jobs such as agriculture that continued in-person work and having less access to health care and social services.

While Latinos are 13.4% of Oregon residents, they have made up 19.4% of COVID-19 cases since the beginning of the pandemic, according to state health data.

The Oregon Health Authority’s weekly outbreak reports have shown dozens of outbreaks at agricultural sites, including farms and food processing sites.

As pediatric COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations rise and with children younger than 12 still ineligible for the vaccine, Bedolla Sotelo said, more farmworkers have scheduled vaccine appointments in recent weeks.

“Our community has been looking more for vaccines,” she said. “Kids are going back to school, and a lot of folks who we serve are parents. Folks are making sure they and their kids have their vaccines.”

Bedolla Sotelo’s observations mirror wider nationwide trends of vaccination rates increasing in the past month.

Martha Lopez, a healthy work-places organizer at PCUN, said several people who had not yet been vaccinated have changed their minds as they saw the spike in pediatric cases.

“I tell people, ‘You have children who are 4, 5, 6 years old, and this can

affect them. If you don’t want to take care of yourself, think of your children. If you get infected, you might infect them. Do you want to see them die?’” Lopez said in Spanish. “Then their perception changes a bit.”

### Barriers for Indigenous workers

Lopez and others said it’s a challenge having these conversations with Indigenous farmworkers whose primary language may not be Spanish.

She described visiting apartments recently and struggling to share vaccine information with people whose first language is Mam, a Mayan language spoken in Guatemala.

“I was speaking to somebody and they said, ‘How do you want us to get vaccinated if we get to the clinic and start filling out papers and we don’t understand? I can’t read Spanish, so how can I sign something if I don’t know what it says?’” Lopez said.

PCUN has one organizer who speaks Mixteco and is in the process of hiring a Mam-speaking organizer, Bedolla Sotelo and Lopez said.

Bedolla Sotelo said PCUN has asked state health officials for more COVID-19 resources in Indigenous languages.

Vera acknowledged there are gaps in sharing vaccine information with speakers of Indigenous languages, but pointed to videos the agency has made in Mam and other languages as well as a health-focused Radio Poder program that airs in Spanish, Mam, Mixteco Alto, Mixteco Bajo, K’iche’ and Purépecha.

He also noted the Oregon Health Authority’s role in establishing the Centro de Atención a Comunidades Indígenas, a Lincoln County program that began after the wildfires and one of the state’s largest agricultural workplace outbreaks of COVID-19 at Pacific Seafood last summer highlighted the need to provide health and safety information in Indigenous languages.

The COVID-19 Farmworker Study, a project that surveyed 300 farmworkers across the state, found the pandemic’s impact generally was more pronounced for Indigenous farmworkers, who may represent about 40% of Oregon farmworkers. One of the project’s policy recommendations was for state agencies and community-based organizations to increase their supports for Indigenous farmworkers, starting with bridging language gaps.

The survey found Indigenous farmworkers were more likely than non-Indigenous farmworkers to report losing weeks and months of work and were less likely to have heard of resources like the Oregon Worker Relief Fund, which provides financial assistance to people whose immigration status prevents them from accessing unemployment insurance and stimulus checks.

### Other outreach efforts continue

Protecting Oregon Farmworkers continues working with a network of 19 mostly community-based organizations and federally qualified health centers around the state.

On a recent Thursday, organizations such as Mano a Mano and Oregon Human Development Corporation were distributing resources along with the Oregon Health Authority to farmworkers at a farm labor contractor’s office in Brooks.

They also visit agricultural labor housing, apartment complexes, shopping centers, churches and other places farmworkers congregate to reduce as many time, scheduling and transportation barriers as possible to accessing the vaccine and other resources, Vera said.

“What we have learned through this process, and we already knew this, is that in working with Latino communities and migrant and seasonal farmworkers, it takes the physical presence and in-person presence to make that real connection,” he said.

*Dora Totoian covers agricultural workers through Report for America, a program that aims to support local journalism and democracy by reporting on under-covered issues and communities.*

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## Fires

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sign a banner to support residents in Greenville, California who are dealing with the Dixie Fire. An event is also scheduled Monday at the Idanha-Detroit Fire District where residents were invited to share their wildfire stories.

### Remembering a year ago

On the night of evacuations, Keasey and his wife stumbled around their house in the dark to quickly collect their belongings.

With 15 minutes to evacuate and only the clothes on his back, Keasey grabbed his phone, wallet and medications and joined the line of cars fleeing the canyon.

“Sometimes we get asked how we felt through all of this and the short answer is that we mostly felt numb,” he said. “Later, when we watched the many news reports, we were horrified at the scale of devastation and what the canyon communities were losing.”

“But we knew with the support of friends, family, faith and community we would find a way to recover, rebuild and move forward to an unknown new normal,” he said.

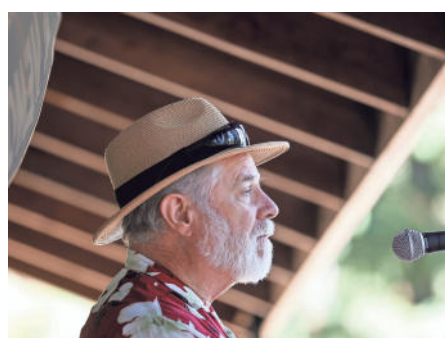
Keasey said their family was lucky to find the house standing when they returned. Others weren’t so lucky.

Randall Klagge and his family packed and left before midnight on Sept. 7. They returned to find their home destroyed.

“It was just heartbreaking,” Klagge said. “We saw so many houses that were gone. The scorched trees were everywhere. And we came back, and there was nothing left.”

### Grateful for firefighter efforts

Mill City Mayor Tim Kirsch and commissioners from Marion and Linn counties thanked career and volunteer fire-



**Dave Keasey shares his experience during the 2020 Santiam Canyon wildfires during a memorial service on Sunday in Mill City.** ABIGAIL DOLLINS / STATESMAN JOURNAL

fighters, especially those from the Mill City Rural Fire Protection District.

Eleven mostly volunteers firefighters, including Chief Leland Ohrt, were awarded medals for staying behind after being ordered to leave, and protected Mill City.

Marion County Commissioner Danielle Bethell said the event came out of an emotional desire to be with family, friends and community who experienced loss during the fires. Bethell, who is a member of the Detroit community, said her family’s trailer burned down during the wildfires.

“We’ve learned people feel better together in the process of their recovery. They can share their stories and lean on each other and know that the person they’re sharing it with went through the same experience,” Bethell said. “We’ve come this far and maybe take a breath together and recognize together that we are rebuilding and yes, it’s difficult, but the canyon will recover.”

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## Letters

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somebody because they are this or that ethnicity. They know that’s wrong. But favoritism, they don’t think of it as being illegal and it actually is.”

Listing agents at The Keyes Company in Miami use a spreadsheet so that sellers can compare multiple offers based on objective information such as price, type of loan, down payment and closing date.

When Paula Renaldo, the firm’s chief marketing officer, and her husband, Anthony, sold the starter home they bought in 2008 to pay for their children’s college education, they created a spreadsheet, too.

A young woman who had been outbid on home after home tried to present them with a love letter, but they rejected it. Her offer was not the highest and they sold the home to another buyer.

“The market is so tight right now and there are so many offers, people are trying any which way to set themselves apart,” Paula Renaldo said. “I tell the listing agents: Whatever love letters you get, go ahead and build a bonfire with them.”

The Arizona Association of Realtors says listing agents should educate sellers about fair housing laws and the pitfalls of love letters, according to its CEO K. Michelle Lind.

It also recommends that members avoid assisting in drafting love letters and should never read them. Instead, they should document all offers received and the seller’s objective reasons for accepting an offer.

“It’s nearly impossible to write a love letter to a seller without in some way, shape or form mentioning a protected class,” said Seth Task, president of Ohio Realtors, which also recommends its members not use love letters. “It’s just best for an agent and a seller to not even remotely put themselves in a position of being accused of a violation of fair housing laws.”

### Bidding wars fuel use of love letters

But as stratospheric prices and record low housing inventory fuel bidding wars across the country, love letters are more popular than ever.

Realtors say they don’t want to put their buyers at a disadvantage in competitive situations by refusing to pass them along. Besides, they say, sellers are swayed first and foremost by the offering price and terms, not platitudes and promises.

Mark Strüb, a real estate agent in Austin, Texas, invites all his clients to submit a personal letter and most of them do. His policy: “It can’t hurt.”

“I have had listing agents say, ‘we loved the letter’ when they accept the offer. Realistically, they also loved the cash price,” Strüb said. “It’s price and terms all day long but letters can make a difference if offers are close.”

Apparently, the right words can be persuasive.

In 2019, Redfin studied the most effective strategies to win a bidding war.

All-cash offers more than tripled a buyer’s odds. Writing a love letter came in second, increasing a buyer’s chances by 59%.

Just ask Erin and Scott Iler. In 2018, they were renting in Monrovia, California, watching helplessly as home prices soared beyond their reach.

Fearing they’d never be able to afford a home for their two young daughters, they were considering moving out of state when they spotted a 1930s Tudor home with a steep gabled roof, arched doorways and barred ceilings.

The home was in need of major repairs and was being sold “as is,” but already had multiple offers over the asking price of \$775,000.

“The seller’s agent told me that the woman who lived here for over 50 years died and her children were the trustees,” Erin Iler said.

Their real estate agent warned that it was a long shot but, along with their offer at list price, the Ilers enclosed a letter.

They told the homeowners that they were both teachers in the local school district who wanted to put down roots in a community they love and that they dreamed of their girls growing up in the home. Their offer was accepted 24 hours later.

### For some Realtors, a change of heart

Over the past 20 years, their Realtor, Donna Baker, says many of her buyers wrote similar letters.

“These love letters definitely pulled at the heartstrings of sellers who were emotionally attached to their homes, and it gave my clients a leg up on the competition,” she said.

And that’s why Baker avoids them now when she lists homes.

“There is too much opportunity for sellers to accept an offer from a buyer who matches their idea of someone who will ‘fit into their neighborhood,’” she said.

Buffalo, New York, real estate agent Lesleylinda Lannan has also had a change of heart.

A few years ago she represented a couple who fell in love with a townhouse. The husband was a military veteran and had a home loan backed by the Department of Veterans Affairs which involved more red tape. The couple made an emotional appeal to the homeowners and enclosed their wedding photo.

Theirs was the first offer and the homeowners, an older couple who were downsizing, were so touched that they accepted and canceled the open house.

Today Lannan says she no longer passes along these love letters to sellers. In fact, she reveals nothing about the buyers when she presents offers, not even their names.

“It has nothing to do with how likable you are or how much you like the property,” she said. “It’s a business deal and everybody should have a fair chance. We have a long, sordid history of housing discrimination in this country, and it’s time for it to stop.”

*Contributing: Jayme Fraser*