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How to Grow Good Housing

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On the day after Thanksgiving in 1960, Edward R. Murrow appeared on American TV screens in the documentary *Harvest of Shame*, interviewing migrant-farmworker parents and children and exposing what he described as “sweatshops of the soil.” At one labor camp, people bedded down on straw instead of mattresses. In the six decades since, exposés of inferior farmworker housing have surfaced at seemingly regular intervals.

In January, investigations into the mass shooting at two mushroom farms in Half Moon Bay, California, inadvertently revealed workers housed in dilapidated trailers and shacks. Governor Gavin Newsom and other state officials promised to examine the “simply deplorable” and “heartbreaking” living conditions. Representative Anna Eshoo invited a farmworkers’ advocate to attend the State of the Union address. California Terra Garden, the operator of one of the mushroom farms, vowed to build new, permanent housing for its workers.

The Half Moon Bay tragedy raises the uncomfortable question of why it took the killings of seven Chinese and Mexican immigrants to draw attention to the housing needs of California’s farmworkers, the same people who produce half of the nation’s fresh fruits and vegetables and nuts. “Substandard housing is still a terrible reality for many farmworkers, who have struggled unseen for so long and have borne the burden of cheap food prices on their shoulders,” says Julie Taylor, executive director of the National Farm Worker Ministry.

Yet U.S. capitalism, the system whose excesses led to the squalid living conditions endured by many farmworkers, may also offer part of the solution. To meet their labor needs, growers and farm-labor contractors (who supply growers with farmworkers to tend, harvest, and pack) are offering

better pay—and better housing. At the same time, state legislation is promoting the construction of affordable housing, federally funded programs are facilitating homeownership in agricultural areas, and there is renewed interest in cooperative housing. There's reason for optimism.

BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME

In the agricultural town of Salinas, harvest season is heralded by muddy boots lined up outside motel rooms. From April to December, the 18-room Willow Lodge on Main Street is transformed into a guesthouse for migrant farmworkers. In late March of this year, unseasonal downpours have pushed back the starting date. Manager Umesh Panchal says he expects that in a couple of weeks, a farm-labor contractor will come by to put all the motel beds in storage and install two bunk beds in each room for workers with H-2A visas—participants in a federal program that permits migrants to perform temporary agricultural work in the United States. “After the first month, they are like my family members. Everybody is a big help,” says Panchal of the tenants. “But the men who show up are different each year.”

The H-2A visa program has grown nearly fivefold in the past 10 years and now accounts for more than 10 percent of U.S. farmworkers—370,000 people. To employ H-2A visa holders, growers and farm-labor contractors must provide them with transportation, housing, and access to food that meet specific quality standards.

The H-2A visa system is not immune to abuse, and critics argue that it continues a historic pattern of treating migrant farmworkers as disposable labor, with no path to citizenship. Yet the popularity of the program—among employers and workers—is evidence of an ongoing labor shortage that is benefiting farmworkers in general, even those who are undocumented and most vulnerable to exploitation. (About half of those toiling in California's fields are there illegally, according to data from the 2015–19 National Agricultural Workers Survey.) With fewer people available for and/or interested in agricultural work, housing has become a competitive advantage for growers and farm-labor contractors looking to hire.

“Housing is the number-one issue for farmworkers,” says Joe Garcia, whose farm-labor-contracting company, Jaguar, employs 4,000 people across California during the state's peak grape harvest. About six years ago, he helped start the Delano-based California Farmworker Foundation. Among its projects is the 2021 purchase of 14 mobile homes, each containing seven studios, that were originally used by director Tyler Perry to house cast and crew while filming in Atlanta during the pandemic. “We've been trying to get them permitted for California for eight months and finally got someone out here about a month ago,” says Garcia. “They will be for farmworkers, one way or another.”

Meanwhile, some growers are taking matters into their own hands—helping their bottom lines by addressing their workers' housing needs. One of the country's largest independent growers, Tanimura & Antle, whose baby romaine is sold in branded bags at Costco, lost \$2 million in 2015 because it couldn't find enough workers to harvest all its lettuce in California. To prevent this from happening again, the company built dormitory-style housing with 800 beds on the vast site of the former Spreckels Sugar factory near Salinas. The accommodations are available to workers for a modest rent: a bed in a shared suite costs \$225 a month, while the rent for a market-rate studio in Salinas ranges from \$1,500 to the low \$2,000s.

LITTLE VILLAGES

Farm-labor contractors and growers aren't the only ones who have taken matters into their own hands. On a morning in late March, the route to San Jerardo has a big Road Closed sign posted

owing to flooding, but plenty of people are ignoring it, as evidenced by all the tracks in the mud. Located about five miles southeast of Salinas, San Jerardo was the first farmworker housing cooperative in the Salinas Valley and is still going strong.

In 1972, after losing their jobs at Pic 'n Pac Foods in Salinas and being evicted from its trailer park, 30 farmworker families camped on the nearby road. Two and a half weeks later, they moved to an old labor camp outside of town. Camp McCallum had housed migrant workers in the Bracero Program, which was started during World War II to alleviate a nationwide shortage of farm labor, but the site was abandoned after the program ended in 1964. A leader of the farmworker families was able to buy the derelict property, and after negotiations, he helped establish San Jerardo. In a housing cooperative, people don't own their homes; they own a share in the whole community and pay monthly dues to cover operating expenses and build a financial reserve.

The San Jerardo cooperative is akin to a little village surrounded by fields; its concrete barracks have been transformed into a carefully tended neighborhood. About 250 residents live in its 64 homes, whose front lawns and gardens line the quiet streets. A childcare center by the entrance serves the families of migrant workers.

Over the years, San Jerardo has survived power struggles and power vacuums and an existential crisis of water contamination. It has paid off a \$2.2 million loan from the U.S. Department of Agriculture that it used to renovate the barracks, and it has built up savings of about \$800,000. To further protect its future, the co-op has set aside \$550,000 of its savings for maintaining its water system. Above all, San Jerardo has been able to hold dues to \$480 a month for a four-bedroom house and \$260 a month for a two-bedroom house.

You need unity and cooperation—if you have those two things, you can make co-ops everywhere,” says Horacio Amezcua, who moved to San Jerardo in 1979 as a teenager, took over management of the cooperative in 2005, and stepped down last year.

The same winter rains that have flooded the road to San Jerardo have devastated the small agricultural community of Pajaro, about 25 miles north of here. Amezcua says he has spoken with someone from a group of as many as 19 families who were displaced by the floods and are interested in starting a housing cooperative: “They're going to need technical assistance and backup support for financing. I don't know if I'm going to be able to help them, but I can point them to some resources.”

FAMILIES, TOO

In the 1990s, Napa County began operating its first public housing center for farmworkers. Meanwhile, privately operated camps began disappearing in response to increasing land values. In 2000, extreme overcrowding at the county's Calistoga center—more than 100 men were staying at a place designed for 60—pushed the community to do more collectively. The trade association Napa Valley Vintners led an effort to form a special tax district, authorized in 2004, to provide continuous support for more county-run facilities. Today, in a unique public-private model, the county runs three dormitories, which provide 180 beds for single men. The growers pay a tax of \$12 per acre, which covers 30 percent of the housing's operating costs; workers pay \$15 a day for lodging as well as meals and routine medical care, which covers 50 percent; and state and county subsidies make up the remaining 20 percent.

According to Jennifer Palmer, the director of housing and homeless services for Napa County, it could run these dormitories year-round because most vineyard workers no longer migrate. But the county must close them for about a month each year because the state regulates them as seasonal

housing. “The labor force has changed a lot—there are increasingly larger groups of women who work in farm labor, as well as families,” says Palmer.

Not surprisingly, the cost of housing is too high for most farmworker families, and there’s not enough of it. A 2018 study of farmworker housing in Salinas Valley and Pajaro Valley by the California Institute for Rural Studies, a research and advocacy group, found that “although frequently the focus has been on providing housing for temporary farmworkers, the data is clear that the most significant need is for permanent farmworker family housing.” The study concluded that an additional 45,560 units of housing were needed to ease overcrowded conditions in the two valleys.

In 2015, 18-year-old strawberry picker Karen Barrera and her 1-year-old son were living with her parents, who also worked on farms, and her three younger sisters in a run-down apartment in Salinas. Their lives plunged into chaos when one sister developed tumors in her leg and was diagnosed with a sarcoma. Shortly after, Barrera and her family were evicted. For two years, they moved from one temporary living situation to another. At one point, the family moved into her aunt’s house, which was already occupied by 12 people. Because of her sister’s health issue, the family was eventually able to lease a four-bedroom apartment in an affordable housing complex in Soledad. But her parents had already been on the waiting list for 10 years. Barrera has now signed up to get an apartment for herself, her partner, and her son. “The lists are so long,” she says. “I want things to move faster.”

And perhaps they will soon. Last year, California passed legislation that encourages affordable housing development, and since 2007, the state has provided allocations for farmworker housing through the Joe Serna, Jr. grant program. (San Mateo County has applied for a \$5 million grant to build farmworker housing in the wake of the Half Moon Bay tragedy.)

A reason to be optimistic is that people across the country have recognized how crucial housing affordability is. Everyone gets it,” says Tom Collishaw, the president and CEO of Self-Help Enterprises, a nonprofit affordable housing developer based in Visalia. Founded in 1965, the developer has roots in the American Friends Service Committee, which helped a group of Appalachian miners build their own houses during the Depression and later expanded its work to California.

Collishaw and his organization work with prospective homeowners in the San Joaquin Valley, mostly agricultural workers. To lower the cost of home buying, they combine the Department of Agriculture’s Section 502 Direct Loan Program, which helps people in rural areas achieve homeownership, with sweat equity. Today, some 100 nonprofits in the United States are constructing this “mutual self-help housing.” Self-Help Enterprises is the largest one, and it has a goal of building 100 homes a year in California.

“I’ve been doing this for over 40 years, and I believe that farmworkers are uniquely successful in this program,” says Collishaw. “They’re no strangers to hard work.”

DREAM HOMES

At 3 p.m. on a Friday in late March in Orosi, which is a 45-minute drive southeast of Fresno through groves of citrus trees, Maria and Jose Garibay are hammering nails to connect the shear walls to the framing of their one-story house. The nails need to be spaced within six inches apart to pass inspection, so they are checking the first round and adding more as necessary. Maria has been here since 9 a.m., while Jose arrived after a full day spent pruning pear trees. Maria worked in the fields and as a fruit packer until the birth of her son, five years ago. She and Jose will keep at it until 6 p.m. today and then come back for a full day on Saturday.

The Garibays are one of 10 families in a group organized by Self-Help Enterprises. Each family has signed up to contribute 40 hours per week doing construction on its home for approximately 11 months. With their sweat equity, the Garibays' home will cost them \$256,000 instead of the appraised value of \$309,000.

A \$53,000 reduction in price is significant. The Garibays, like all families who qualify for the Section 502 mortgage program, make less than 80 percent—or \$62,300 for a family of four—of the area median income. At least 40 percent of the families in Self-Help Enterprises' programs qualify as "very low income," which means below \$38,950 for a family of four. According to numbers from the 2015–19 National Agricultural Workers Survey, California farmworkers on average make \$20,000 to \$25,000 a year. These figures underscore the importance of making housing more affordable for farmworkers.

Still, NIMBYism, deeply rooted in racism and economic inequity, remains difficult to eradicate; a stubborn housing gap is one result. Too often, employers provide substandard housing; too often, workers are reluctant to speak out because they are dependent on them for lodging or because they are undocumented—leading to the miserable living conditions like those in Half Moon Bay.

In a press statement, California Terra Garden, the mushroom farm operator, explained that its decision to remedy the wretched housing of its workers came about "after collaborative discussions with local officials that uncovered a series of code and permitting requirements unknown before the tragic shootings that occurred last week."

In the meantime, farmworkers and their families across the state continue to yearn for better living conditions. When completed, the Garibays' house will have four bedrooms and two bathrooms. "You make a lot of sacrifices for it, but at the end, it's worth it," Maria says.

They hope to move in this October.