



Confronting the housing crisis in the agricultural community

It's no secret agricultural and migrant workers have long been paid little for what they do, and some experts believe their low wages, coupled with the availability of affordable lodging, has led to a housing crisis for farm workers in California.



A wall to wall mural in the community room was painted by students from the Chicana/o Studies mural workshop of UC Davis assistant professor Maceo Montoya. It is based on the stories and dreams of Mutual Housing at Spring Lake resident members.



Mutual Housing at Spring Lake resident member Rafael Herrera.

Mutual Housing California develops housing that is affordable to a diversity of households. Our housing builds strong and stable communities through resident participation and leadership development. For more information, call (916) 453-8400 or visit our website at mutualhousing.com.

One of the organizations hoping to rectify this problem is Mutual Housing California, a non-profit dedicated to improving housing opportunities for lower income families. Their latest community, Mutual Housing at Spring Lake in Yolo County, exclusively caters to current and former agricultural workers and their families.

Rafael Herrera, one of the community's residents, is supporting his wife and three children on a minimum wage. Herrera, 37, told ABC10 that's not nearly enough money, especially during the off-season, when he's living on unemployment.

"In times like these, in this economy, I don't think it's enough (money)," Herrera, speaking through a translator, told ABC10. "The salary is a bit low. To have a family—my wife and three kids—I feel like no, we need more (money) because we work a lot of hours and it's very little, what they pay us."

If Herrera hadn't been accepted into the Spring Lake community, he said, he'd be living in much worse conditions.

Nearly 15 percent of California's agricultural workers live and work in the Sacramento Valley, and like Herrera, many are paid a minimum wage. Dr. Marc Schenker, a distinguished professor at UC Davis specializing in occupational and other health issues for migrant workers, said because of this, it's fair to say California's farm workers are facing a housing crisis.

"Many years ago, farm owners provided housing," Schenker said. "That ended 20, 30 years ago, and the result is farm workers are on their own to find housing. That situation, combined with low wages, results in poor housing conditions."

Recognizing this problem, Mutual Housing's CEO, Rachel Iskow, said her non-profit decided to focus on Yolo County—specifically the

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Mutual Housing at Spring Lake resident member José Jimenez. Watch the video [here](#).

City of Woodland—because there was no permanent housing for agricultural workers.

The community at Spring Lake serves 210 people in 61 apartments and townhomes of varying sizes, and its rental assistance program allows anyone making below 60 percent of the area median income (adjusted for household size) to apply for residency.

To be considered for an apartment, applicants must show evidence that their income is from agricultural work either in the fields, processing plants or packing houses, and since the development receives subsidies from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to make the apartments more affordable, prospective residents must provide documentation or proof of immigration status.

José Jimenez, a retired agricultural worker who came to the United States illegally in the 1970s and has since become a citizen, lives in the Spring Lake community with his wife. While he retired a few years ago from working in the fields, he argues wages today are much higher than when he first started.

“We used to be paid very poorly,” Jimenez said, speaking through a translator, told ABC10. “Now they are paying at least \$10 an hour, but when I first came to (the United States), I used to be paid \$1.50 an hour.”

Jimenez said the farm owner he worked for was able to pay illegal immigrants so little by promising to protect them from the authorities.

“So, because of our interest in not getting caught by the immigration police, we’d continue working for him, despite the low pay,” Jimenez said.

The average resident at Spring Lake earns an hourly wage ranging from \$12 to \$15, but Herrera, who’s worked the fields for 15 years, still only makes \$10.50.

“The boss gives us unemployment,” Herrera said. “That is what I’m able to sustain myself with right now. That’s all the income I have.”

Mutual Housing’s original site at Spring Lake was purchased with the goal of 100 apartments, and the non-profit, said Iskow, is in the process of applying for funding to build another 39 homes to accommodate additional families.

The group’s initiative is a step in the right direction, but California’s billion dollar farming industry is in dire need of wage reform if it expects workers like Herrera to thrive and make ends meet. It’s a life he hopes his children never have to lead.

“I would prefer they better themselves by continuing their education, so that they can get better jobs with better salaries,” Herrera said.