

TESTIMONY OF NORMA FLORES TO THE HOUSE EDUCATION AND LABOR  
COMMITTEE'S SUBCOMMITTEE ON WORKFORCE PROTECTIONS

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My name is Norma Flores and I am just one of estimated hundreds of thousands of farmworker children working hard to feed Americans every day. My four sisters and I began to work in the farm fields since the age of 12 during our summers and any other school breaks we had, but we weren't strangers to farm work at that age. Full-time work weeks now meant 70 hours -- including weekends -- for weeks at a time with no days off. Growing up in a family of many generations of farm workers, we thought life was supposed to be this hard for everyone. Even though we saw both of our parents work hard year-round and spend every penny carefully, we grew up poor. This taught us to value all of our possessions differently. We knew if we wanted a nice pair of sneakers or a ticket to see a new movie, those would be things that would have to be earned with a lot of hard hours of difficult manual labor.

But this was life to us. We weren't informed of what rights we had or educated on what resources were available to help us. In the six years that I worked in the fields, I never saw an inspector in any of the fields I was working in. Had I seen an inspector out there, I would have pointed out the lack of clean bathrooms sometimes half a mile away and the lack of places to wash our hands after handling plants covered in pesticides. I would have pointed out the missing drinking water and the containers with day-old water we had to drink from at times. I would have pointed out the under-age children allowed to work during regular school hours. Working in the corn fields of Indiana or in the asparagus fields of Michigan, it felt like we were at the mercy of the contractors with no one to look out for us and no one to turn to for questions or concerns. One of the most terrifying moments of my life was when an airplane accidentally sprayed pesticides over the field my family and I were working in. We ran out frantically across the street and immediately called our contractor. He simply apologized and asked us to go to another field to continue our work day. Who were we supposed to contact in case we got sick from the pesticides? How would we know?

Farm labor is difficult and dangerous work. We are exposed to many chemicals that can damage our health and migrant farmworkers don't have benefits like health insurance to help us with expensive medical treatments. We are exposed to long hours in hot summer months with back-breaking labor. We work with sharp tools and heavy machinery that can cause a lot of damage if not used properly. Yet as children, we are trusted to have the ability and maturity to handle all of these dangers carefully. I have seen too many times accidents in which children working beside me have gotten deeply cut and infected with the sharp tools we work with or sick from the chemicals we work around. Children at age 12 would not have been allowed to work making copies in an air-conditioned office or cleaning floors at a local store, yet today, in America, children can legally work in harsh conditions out in the farm fields for wages sometimes below minimum wage.

Like all other Americans across the country, the migrant community is also concerned about today's economy. We see in the news how gas prices and the cost of living are on

the rise. Yet what we don't see rising are our wages. Since Cesar Chavez, no major improvements in the lives of migrant farmworkers have been made. They continue to receive the same pay as decades ago. Growers claim that wages must be kept low in order for food prices to stay affordable, but at what price? Is it worth it to exploit children and hurt their futures so you won't have to pay cents more for your groceries? Even this isn't saving Americans from the rising food price inflation. By giving fair wages, migrant families will no longer need their children to work to supplement their incomes and these farmworker children can focus on their studies instead of worrying about the pending family bills.

I was blessed to have parents that put my education as a top priority and migrant youth programs that helped give the educational support I needed to get through my education. After overcoming many educational hardships including interrupted school years and different state school systems, I was able to graduate from one of the nation's leading high schools and complete college in three and a half years. Even though my family continues to work in the fields of Iowa and Texas, I proudly work in an international public relations firm in downtown Chicago.

Other farmworker children aren't so fortunate. I believe that at least two-thirds of migrant farmworker children drop out before high school graduation from the pressures of migration, changing schools, and exhaustion. This dooms most of them to a life of poverty.

Farmworker children continue to be an ignored injustice today in the United States, the world's greatest country. The information is out there, but many choose to look the other way. Just Google migrant farmworker children and you'll get over 87,000 results. Exploitation of children, regardless if it's done legally or illegally, needs to stop today. It's more than doing what is right. It's also about changing the lives of these children and giving them the opportunity to make a future for themselves.