

# Services for Migrant Agricultural Workers

by JULES BERMAN\*

*The recent establishment by President Eisenhower of an Inter-departmental Committee on Migratory Labor, of which the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare is a member, adds interest to the conference held earlier this year on the agricultural worker in the East Coast migratory stream. The report of the conference is summarized in the following pages.*

SEASONAL work in agriculture, with its heavy demand for workers for short periods each year—first in one area and then in another—is far from new. Nor is the movement of seasonal farm workers to help meet this demand a new occurrence. Their movement has created problems, both for the workers themselves and for the communities where they live temporarily.

The units of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare most directly concerned with the needs of migrant agricultural workers called a conference on May 17, 18, and 19, 1954, "to develop ways to extend health, education, and welfare services to agricultural migrants and their families through interstate and inter-agency cooperation." Invitations were issued jointly by the Chief of the Children's Bureau, the Surgeon General of the Public Health Service, and the Commissioner of Education to the official health, education, and welfare agencies of the States through which the East Coast migratory stream passes. Cooperating with the sponsors was the Bureau of Public Assistance.

About 200 men and women took part in the conference. Those who came from the East Coast States<sup>1</sup> included representatives of State agencies and other persons recommended by the States from among public and private groups working directly with

migrant workers. The other participants represented national organizations, the U. S. Department of Labor, the U. S. Department of Agriculture, and the U. S. Housing and Home Finance Agency.

## Preconference Reports

Before they came to the conference, the State agencies prepared reports on the problem of the migrant worker in their States. They summed it up in terms of numbers:

"Approximately 1,500 farmers in Pennsylvania require the services of 12,000 migrant seasonal workers."

". . . The migrant farm population in Delaware from June through October will total 3,383 [of whom] 267 are . . . under fourteen."

"Thirty-five to fifty thousand are registered by Florida as being migrant laborers."

They also expressed it in terms of human problems. One report looked at the adequacy of migrant housing: "A family usually occupies a one or two room shack or several families are housed in an abandoned farmhouse." Another commented: "Housing and sanitation is one of the most serious problems facing the State Board of Health and its county health department." One State reported on school retardation: "By the end of the fourth grade  $\frac{1}{2}$  have been retained, and when they have reached grades 8-9-10, 75 percent of these children fail to pass or are retarded from two to four years." Another State, referring to the education of migrant children, said: "Our problem is knowing how many to expect and at what schools they will likely appear."

Some States noted no special difference between the health of migrants and that of permanent resi-

dents, but others reported evidences of physical and mental ill health. Comments were made on the general lack of medical care. "In certain communities there are simply no services available. . . . In other areas, very limited services are available through private physicians and hospitals but these are utilized only to the extent to which the workers are able to pay for services, primarily of an emergency nature."

"The Indigent Hospital Law is locally administered, and the individual must be a resident for one year."

"Migrants do not have hospital insurance. . . . The hospital is seldom paid."

Child welfare services that are "practically nonexistent" for permanent residents of many counties as well as for migrants, lack of public welfare aid to help "stranded and otherwise destitute non-resident workers," "very limited" casework services—these were other problems noted by State reports.

Only if a migrant can be returned to his State of residence will some of the States grant temporary public assistance to the migrant in need, pending his return home. For many migrants there is no State of residence; they move so often that no State is willing to claim them under its residence laws. A migrant may think he has a home State, but that State may not recognize him as a resident. A delegate from one Southern State was surprised to learn that many persons, including migrants themselves, look upon that State as "home base" for the migrant agricultural worker.

In addition, according to one State's report, the counties "vary in their local legal residence requirements and their ability to offer general assistance." Another State reported that, "due to settlement laws and inadequate number of staff and low budgets, the departments of public welfare have been forced to see many of the needs of this segment of our population go unmet. . . . All financial assistance to migrants through county departments of pub-

\* Division of Program Standards and Development, Bureau of Public Assistance. Summarized from *Report of the East Coast Migrant Conference* (Department of Health, Education, and Welfare), September 1954.

<sup>1</sup> Ten States were represented at the conference: Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Virginia.

lic welfare must be given by the county with no matching funds from the State and Federal governments. This naturally limits the amount of money that can be expended for the care of this non-resident group."

### Conference Discussion

The Conference opened with a general meeting, in which panels represented both the State and the Federal agencies' points of view. Panel members discussing the problem from the State angle pointed out the difficulty of getting agreement on a definition of the term "migrant" and the consequent problem of getting dependable information about the size and make-up of the migrant group. A discussion followed of the problems involved in trying to plan for the "constant mover" as contrasted with the worker who is registered with the State Employment Service; the responsibility of the State agency, as well as the migrant himself, in establishing a "home State" or place of residence; and the connection between a community's acceptance of the migrant worker and its support of programs to meet his needs.

The State panel discussed the need for adult education programs for both migrants and local residents; the importance of uniform health and school records; the fact that many migrant workers are not aware that their children need schooling; the difficulties of working with people who speak a different language; and the strain on health and educational services during peak harvest periods. It was suggested that much could be accomplished by regularizing the employment pattern and by enlisting the help of growers in solving school problems, and also that the farm placement services could be used for supplying information on the numbers of migrants and when and where they can be expected, and for informing migrants about the services available along their scheduled route.

Panel members agreed that interstate cooperation was especially needed in (1) planning adult education programs, (2) securing all necessary personal records, (3) eliminating residence restrictions on community responsibility for emergency services, and (4) developing consultation serv-

ices and methods of collecting data as part of the Federal and State programs to spread information and encourage interstate action.

The panel discussing the Federal agencies' point of view brought out the fact that the U. S. Employment Service has registered 31,000 workers, including 3,000 children under age 14, in the East Coast migratory stream. It was realized that this number may not include all the children and that there are other workers, not registered, known as "free wheelers." Panel members believe that every year there are many children, as well as many adults, in the migrant group who are not getting the health, education, and welfare services that they need. Some of the ways in which agencies of the Federal Government can help State and local groups to provide these services were considered.

During the discussion that followed the panel presentation from the Federal agencies' point of view, there was agreement that local communities should be made aware of the migrant's work and its importance to the agricultural economy and also of the migrant's need for health, education, and welfare services. Among other points considered during the discussion were (1) the wide variations in provisions for medical care of the migrant worker and his family, with clinical services depending entirely on the policy of the agency administering the program and on the availability of funds and facilities; (2) the value of a continuing program of adult education; (3) the lack of Federal funds for conducting educational programs on the local level; and (4) the lack of Federal funds specifically earmarked for day-care centers in migratory labor areas, as well as the limitation in the amount of Federal child welfare services funds.

The conferees noted that Federal regulations do not require that programs of maternal and child health and child welfare services be made available to all mothers and children and that limitations in Federal grants make it impossible to provide services to all who need them. Another deterring factor to general coverage is the lack of local community outlets through which services can be pro-

vided. Local welfare departments, it was realized, may be unable to assume the financial burden of providing health and welfare services to nonresidents, and State and Federal funds may be needed.

It was urged that the migrant worker's low wages, lack of protection by labor laws, and lack of coverage under old-age and survivors insurance<sup>2</sup> and unemployment insurance should be considered in developing proposals for the betterment of his family.

It was recognized that the State employment services can play an important role in regularizing work opportunities by sending workers to areas where their labor and skills are needed; the use of the employment services, it was believed, should be stimulated to provide a point of contact between the worker and government services.

After the general meeting ended the conference participants separated into 10 groups, each of which was composed of delegates from one State and of persons from the national organizations and Federal agencies who were, for the purposes of the conference, "residents" of the particular State.

Discussion in each of the groups focused on four general subjects—the situation in the particular State, problems on which help is needed from other States, what the participants hoped to achieve through the conference, and the development of specific questions to which State delegates would seek answers when they reformed into small groups according to their interests in health, education, or welfare. The questions the State meetings raised were the basis of proposals made by the small groups. The proposals were then submitted to three major "special interest" groups for review and synthesis before they were finally presented at the last general session. Although the conference as a body took no formal action on specific proposals, there was agreement on major objectives for planning and action.

<sup>2</sup> With the 1954 amendments to the Social Security Act, most agricultural workers are covered by old-age and survivors insurance. See the *Bulletin*, September 1954, pages 3-18.

Out of the discussion grew a new consciousness of the problems that the migrant faces, with a realization of the interagency responsibility within each State for helping the migrant meet his problem, the need for integrating services and for interstate communication and cooperation, and ways in which the Federal agencies can serve the States as they approach the problem. Certain common threads ran throughout the conference. One may be summarized—the feeling that the migrant worker is a citizen, that he and his family have all the rights and responsibilities inherent in citizenship, and that public agencies and private organizations should help him realize his potentialities by planning services not only for but with him.

### **Proposals**

The conference made 12 specific proposals:

1. That interstate, Federal, State, and local committees, councils, or similar mechanisms be organized where they do not now exist for purposes of providing leadership, exchanging information, planning and coordinating action, and study of problems and needs.

2. That improved methods of collecting and distributing information about migrants and for migrants be developed.

3. That long-range programs be planned to provide adult migrants with knowledge about the health, education, and welfare of themselves and their families.

4. That in-service training be provided for teachers, public health workers, and others who work directly with migrants. The training would concentrate on developing understanding of the migrant, his back-

ground, the community's obligation toward him, and how that obligation might be met.

5. That schools adapt the curriculum to meet the individual and group needs of migrant children; that school attendance of migrant children be improved; that attention be given to language difficulties, particularly for Spanish-speaking children; that attention be given to problems of children in families of "free-wheelers"; and that a school transfer card and workbooks be developed.

6. That—for continuity of service—a uniform health record be carried by the individual or family; that a program of health examinations be developed; that strong local public health departments be promoted and given adequate financial support; that ways to augment health services at peak periods be explored; and that—because of the interstate nature of the health problems of migrants—supplementary Federal funds be made available on a continuing basis.

7. That minimum standards of housing and sanitation for transient labor be developed along with effective guides for administration and enforcement.

8. That care for children up to working age be provided; that child welfare services be available to migrant families and their children on the same basis as to residents; and that the interstate movement of unattached youth in the migrant stream be investigated.

9. That counseling and financial assistance to meet emergency needs be provided to migrants on the same basis as to other citizens.

10. That States review their residence laws with a view to changing or reinterpreting them to the advantage of all citizens in need.

11. That migrants be included in expanded existing services rather than in separate services developed especially for migrants.

12. That studies and demonstrations be carried on (a) to establish factual base lines to use in developing programs and (b) to try out ways of providing services to migrants.

### ***Interdepartmental Committee on Migratory Labor***

An Interdepartmental Committee on Migratory Labor—long advocated by many groups, including the East Coast Migrant Conference—was established by President Eisenhower on August 26. The Secretary of Labor is chairman of the new committee, and the other members are the Secretary of Agriculture; the Secretary of the Interior; the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare; and the Administrator of the Housing and Home Finance Agency. The Committee is set up in the Department of Labor, and that Department's appropriation for the fiscal year ended June 30, 1955, included \$50,000 to be used for the Committee's work.

In announcing the formation of the Committee, the President pointed out that "a coordinated Federal approach and a full utilization of existing resources will make possible more effective action in the solution of migratory labor problems. . . . It is my hope that this Committee will aid the various Federal agencies in mobilizing and stimulating more effective programs and services for migrants and in providing service to State and local areas through their constituent members. I believe this Committee can be of great help in developing cooperative relationships between the Federal agencies and the State agencies concerned with these problems."