

Preventing a Produce Labor Shortage



Our food supply is typically very stable. Rain or shine, field and packinghouse workers harvest and process food for the American people. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced a level of uncertainty which leads people to wonder what will happen if outbreaks of illness at many locations prevent workers from harvesting. If not addressed, lack of labor could affect planting and harvesting of the fresh fruits and vegetables we need for good health. As more information becomes available about the link between a healthy diet and disease prevention, we gain a better understanding of the need for maintaining a robust supply of food that has been grown, instead of created. Keeping produce workers healthy, therefore, should be a top priority.

By now, everyone knows that the Coronavirus is highly contagious. Essential businesses, like food producers, must implement procedures that will prevent or limit the spread of the virus among workers. Not only is this necessary to protect workers, but customers benefit as well. Ultimately, more employees at work means more food is produced to feed the world. The University of Georgia Extension advises produce farms and packinghouses to institute a comprehensive program to keep employees healthy, and businesses running. First, they suggest enhanced communication to inform team members of COVID-19 symptoms, and ways to limit spread. Companies are urged to require frequent handwashing,

and consistent use of masks and gloves. Cleaning and disinfecting surfaces, shared tools, harvest baskets, bags, and aprons is also advised. Workers are discouraged from sharing phones, utensils and vehicles, and encouraged to work at least six feet away from fellow employees. Where distancing is not possible, several alternatives are recommended. Employers can limit the number of workers who are in a facility at one time, and/or they can assign workers to cohorts (small groups). The same group of employees would work together until the pandemic has ended. The purpose of cohorts is to prevent illness from spreading throughout an entire facility. Ideally, if a person does become ill, the risk of further infection would be limited to the employees in the cohort.

Produce company employees are not only vulnerable to contagious diseases while working in the field and on packing lines, they are also more likely to become ill when living in company-provided housing. In a Produce Marketing Association "Interview with the Experts" segment, Dr. Martial Ndeffo, infectious disease researcher, stated that the best way to prevent disease spread is to "try to keep it out of the community." This can be extremely difficult when workers have a need to travel away from their working /living quarters. Doctor Ndeffo suggests employers determine the workers' reasons for going out, and then come up with solutions

to meet the needs. For example, if workers are leaving the facility seeking entertainment, employers can provide movies or other activities, which might encourage them to stay in. If employers are leaving because they want to visit family, perhaps Skype or Zoom accounts can be set up. Doctor Ndeffo also says employers should consider restructuring living quarters and work facilities to make them less susceptible to the spread of illness.

A comprehensive prevention program also includes employee screening.

The Centers for Disease Control has published mitigation activities for workplaces, which outlines recommendations to help businesses manage the COVID-19 situation. The CDC offers specific advice based on the level of transmission in the community where a business is located. One instruction is to "consider daily in-person or virtual health checks (e.g. temperature and respiratory symptom screening) of staff and visitors entering buildings (if feasible)." By following this guidance, management can identify any employee who might be ill or have a fever (often the first sign of COVID19 infection), before they enter the work facility. Conducting screening at multiple facility entry points is also recommended.

Measuring employee temperature may seem like a daunting task, especially with large employee populations. However, a well-outlined, detailed

process, along with the right tools, will help management to avoid problems in the long run. A non-contact thermometer is a safe, reliable product employers can use to help prevent the spread of disease. DeltaTrak's Non-Contact Infrared Forehead Thermometer, Model 15007, has

received FDA 510(k) clearance as a medical device. According to Frederick Wu, President and CEO, "Our focus is presenting meaningful solutions to current pandemic conditions. With so much emphasis on health and safety at this time, it is important that we provide a tool that can be used to

quickly and accurately measure body temperature of large work groups, such as field and packinghouse workers in produce companies." Mr. Wu is certain the Non-Contact Infrared Forehead Thermometer will become an integral part of customers' COVID-19 screening programs.

References

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