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The Secret Canadian Housing Crisis: Migrant workers need a national housing standard

“A lot of things lacking,” “inhumane,” “not appropriate,” “dirty,” “not meant for humans,” and a major source of “stress on you.” These are some words used by migrant agricultural workers to describe their housing in Canada, according to a new guidance document authored [by a group of 29 academics, advocates, and clinicians working closely with them](#). With many workers noting that their employers often “disguise things” [before inspectors arrive], the authors of this new guidance document, titled *A National Housing Standard for Migrant Agricultural Workers in Canada*, are calling for the government to raise the bar on housing conditions for migrant agricultural workers.

[The guidance document](#) recommends the introduction of consistent, strongly enforced housing standards that can become the norm across the country. Key recommendations include reducing the ratios of workers per kitchen, washroom, and laundry facility, improving access to transportation, and limiting employer surveillance and controls over housing. Furthermore, the authors suggest that the standards must be accompanied by strong and well-funded enforcement, including training about the unique vulnerabilities faced by migrant agricultural workers.

Dr. Jill Hanley, professor at McGill University, and one of the lead authors of this guidance document, believes that raising the bar for housing standards for migrant agricultural workers is necessary to improve the standard of living for all who are living and working in Canada.

“If we continue to keep a low and inconsistent bar for housing quality for this group, we jeopardize not only the health and safety of migrant agricultural workers, but also send a message to all Canadians that poor and undignified housing is acceptable in Canada. This more hidden housing crisis is upholding the more visible one. We want national housing standards that can send a strong message of how we expect individuals living and working in Canada to be treated, regardless of status.”

Migrant agricultural workers - temporary foreign workers employed in agriculture - are hired from countries like Mexico, Jamaica, and Guatemala on temporary visas, and Canadian employers are legally responsible for their accommodations. Overcrowded, unsafe, and unsanitary housing can pose a threat to their health, allowing viruses to spread rapidly.

The authors are recommending that these national housing standards be taken up across the country to improve the living conditions of migrant agricultural workers. In addition to prescribing specific housing requirements, the authors suggest that effective national housing standards require greater federal leadership and government coordination, union representation, and permanent residence upon arrival.

Dr. C. Susana Caxaj, an associate professor at Western University, one of the lead authors of the guidance document, whose research with hundreds of migrant workers across Ontario and British Columbia motivated this initiative, reflects:

“In our research, we have encountered so many migrant agricultural workers who have experienced truly atrocious and undignified living conditions. Many want to know, why are we living like this? Why is our work welcome, but we as people are so devalued in Canada? The federal government must move forward from an endless loop of consultations with stakeholders, towards embracing the clear evidence and compelling recommendations that have been put forward that can improve this group’s living conditions.”

Advocate, author and former migrant agricultural worker Gabriel Allahdua, another contributor to the guidance document adds:

“Being a migrant worker in Canada often means enduring extremely difficult working and living conditions, while being excluded from many of the rights and protections others enjoy. Canada is more than just a country—it is a global standard of fairness and dignity. Canada and employers must go beyond providing merely ‘adequate housing’ and strive to ensure dignified living conditions. I am proud to be associated with this document, which calls for housing standards that reflect the respect and humanity every worker deserves.”

MEDIA CONTACTS:

C. Susana Caxaj, RN, PhD

Associate Professor, School of Nursing, Western University

Phone: 416-839-8467

Email: scaxaj@uwo.ca

Profile: https://www.uwo.ca/fhs/nursing/about/faculty/research_supervisors/caxaj_s.html

Gabriel Allahdua

Author, Advocate, Activist-in-Residence

Email: gallahdua4771@gmail.com

Profile: <https://btlbooks.com/authors/view/gabriel-allahdua>

Jill Hanley, PhD

Professor, School of Social Work, McGill University

Email: jill.hanley@mcgill.ca

Profile:

<https://www.mcgill.ca/socialwork/about/people/faculty/hanley#:~:text=by%20this%20group.-,Dr.,Policy%20or%20Social%20Work%2C%20Dr.>

Mohammed Rafi Arefin

Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, University of British Columbia

Email: rafi.arefin@ubc.ca

Profile: <https://geog.ubc.ca/profile/mohammed-rafi-arefin/>

Adam Perry

Associate Professor, Department of Adult Education, St. Francis Xavier University

Email: aperry@stfx.ca

Profile: <https://www.stfx.ca/faculty-staff/adam-perry>

Stacey Gomez

Executive Director with the Centre for Migrant Worker Rights Nova Scotia

Email: stacey@migrantjusticens.ca

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