

Project Update: Housing for Migrant Workers in Minnesota

In the February 2001 issue of the *CURA Reporter*, Victor Contreras, Jaime Duran, and Kathryn Gilje contributed the lead article, “Migrant Farmworkers in South-Central Minnesota,” which described results from a migrant farmworker-led survey. Sponsored by CURA’s U-Migrant Project and Community Program in cooperation with the University of Minnesota Extension Service, the survey revealed there was much work to be done to improve daycare, youth education, leadership development, and working conditions for migrant workers in south-central Minnesota. Survey results indicated a lack of affordable housing as one of the biggest problems facing migrant workers. Based on these results, workers joined together to form Centro Campesino, a nonprofit advocacy group for migrant workers that today has 850 members.

Members of Centro Campesino decided to develop a follow-up survey to document living conditions in four counties in south-central Minnesota. The organization needed assistance conducting the survey and coordinating the project, so CURA connected Centro Campesino with Dr. Ann Ziebarth, associate professor in the School of Design, Housing, and Apparel at the University of Minnesota, who specializes in rural housing issues. Jimmy Byun, a graduate student in the Department of Agronomy and Plant Genetics at the University, was hired through CURA’s Community Assistantship Program (CAP) to help conduct the survey, enter data, and prepare the final report. The survey was conducted in the summer of 2001 and the report—*Migrant Worker Housing: Survey Results from South-Central Minnesota*—was published in Spanish and English in fall 2002 by Centro Campesino, in collaboration with Hispanic Advocacy and Community Empowerment through Research (HACER) and CURA. The report indicates that employer-provided, open-market housing for migrant workers is limited and recommends that migrant workers develop, own, and manage their own cooperative housing project.

The town of Montgomery, Minnesota, has become a focus for action. With 600 seasonal workers joining a year-round



Photo by Robert Friedman

A lack of affordable housing is one of the biggest problems facing migrant workers in south-central Minnesota. Employer-provided housing—such as these barracks-style cinder-block buildings—is often overcrowded and frequently does not offer private cooking facilities or bathrooms.

population of 2,500, the options for temporary housing in Montgomery are scarce. City officials are aware of acute housing shortages and have been working with Centro Campesino and the nonprofit Three Rivers Community Action to develop affordable housing. Centro Campesino’s community organizing experience and Three Rivers’ expertise in housing development have been a good fit for the needs of Montgomery. A \$100,000 land donation has been secured through the Texas-based Joe and Louise Cook Foundation and a parcel of land in the Montgomery area has been identified for housing development. Plans call for 29 housing units, with 15 rental units and 14 limited equity cooperatives. A 6,000-square-foot community center is also planned. A new nonprofit organization will be formed to take ownership of the project and a private management company out of Mankato will run operations.

In late March, Centro Campesino submitted a 300-page U.S. Department

of Agriculture (USDA) rural development preapplication requesting \$2.4 million to fund 15 housing units and the community center. Centro staff expect to hear back from the USDA about the status of their application within 60 days. They also plan to seek additional funding from Federal Home Loan Bank of Des Moines, Greater Minnesota Housing Fund, and the Minnesota Housing Finance Agency.

At a news conference in Faribault in late March, Centro Campesino released the findings of the report and discussed plans for cooperative housing development and the proposed community center. The event was well attended and received coverage from the *Faribault Daily News*, *Pioneer Press*, and Minnesota Public Radio. The report is available from HACER by calling 612-624-3326 or sending e-mail to hacer@umn.edu. It can also be downloaded as a 1-megabyte PDF file (requires Adobe Acrobat Reader to view or print) at <http://www.hacer-mn.org/PDFs/migrant121202.pdf>.