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## Laurier professors release recommendations to prevent the spread of COVID-19 among migrant agricultural workers

WATERLOO – As the recent deaths of Bonifacio Eugenio Romero and Rogelio Muñoz Santos bring increased attention to the potentially dangerous living and working conditions of migrant agricultural workers in Canada, two Wilfrid Laurier University professors have formed an expert working group to advocate for protections to prevent the spread of COVID-19 among this vulnerable population. Last week, the group launched a [new website](#) featuring a [comprehensive list of evidence-based recommendations](#) for federal and provincial government agencies.

[Jenna Hennebry](#), associate professor of Communication Studies and co-founder of Laurier’s International Migration Research Centre (IMRC), and [Janet McLaughlin](#), associate professor of Health Studies and research associate with the IMRC, are coordinators of the [Migrant Worker Health Expert Working Group \(MWHEWG\)](#), along with C. Susana Caxaj, assistant professor at Western University. The trio started meeting in March with academics and medical experts from across Canada, along with clinical and social service leaders representing key regions where migrant agricultural workers live and work, to evaluate COVID-19-related concerns.

“Under typical circumstances, migrant workers face challenges in accessing health care, including language and cultural considerations, but also fear of losing income, employment or the ability to stay in Canada,” said McLaughlin. “These challenges are only amplified during the pandemic. We must ensure that we overcome these barriers by providing truly accessible health care, as well as making structural changes to temporary foreign worker programs that promote workers’ empowerment and job security.”

More than 420 migrant agricultural workers in Ontario have tested positive for COVID-19, according to a recent Globe and Mail report. Romero, 31, and Santos, 24, both from Mexico, died within a week of each other in the Windsor-Essex region after testing positive for the virus. Hennebry called their deaths “avoidable.”

“We have been diligently developing and sharing recommendations for government agencies and liaising with public health units for more than a decade,” she said. Hennebry and McLaughlin’s years of research on migrant workers’ rights and health have shown that farm accommodations may not enable physical distancing because housing is often crowded, may have inadequate ventilation or insufficient sanitation and cooking amenities.

The MWHEWG is calling for in-person, unannounced inspections of farms that employ migrant workers to ensure adherence to occupational health and safety requirements and to provincial and territorial labour standards. Among the group’s other [recommendations](#) are ongoing translation services and follow-up care for workers who become sick with COVID-19 and changes to temporary migrant worker programs that make it easier for workers to refuse unsafe work and safeguard their health and livelihood.

On their new website, the MWHEWG is also providing [vital health-care information](#) for migrant agricultural workers in English and Spanish. The site is dedicated to the memory of Romero, the first migrant worker in Canada to die as a result of COVID-19.

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