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Ontario sees jump in migrant farm workers with COVID-19

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Juan Lopez Chaparro, 55, is the third migrant farm worker to die after testing positive for COVID-19 in Ontario.

HANDOUT

The number of COVID-19 cases among migrant farm workers has jumped in Ontario, where one public-health unit reported 96 new positive results at a single agri-food operation – the overwhelming majority of them among foreign nationals.

Just two of the 98 cases reported by the Windsor-Essex County Health Unit on Sunday were due to community spread; at the farm confronting the outbreak, roughly 90 per cent of those who tested positive are migrant workers. All of the cases were discovered through a targeted asymptomatic testing campaign, in which mobile assessment units travel to farms to reach as many workers as possible.

Local public-health officials will be on site Monday to conduct in-person assessments at the farm, which was not named in the unit's daily update.

The increase in cases was reported as Ontario's new public-health guidelines directed at the agri-food sector are coming under scrutiny, including from Canada's top doctor. The guidance states that asymptomatic employees who test positive for COVID-19 will now be allowed to continue working, under certain conditions, including that they keep their distance from those who tested negative. Although the new protocol applies to other jobs done outside or with minimal interaction with others, it was released last Wednesday in the context of encouraging agri-food employers to co-operate with mass testing without fear of losing their work force to self-isolation.

Ontario reports 178 new cases, six new deaths related to COVID-19

Sunday's update means there are now more than 800 confirmed cases of COVID-19 among migrant farm workers in Ontario, with more than half in the Windsor area, according to a Globe and Mail count. Health officials have stressed the workers arrived healthy and contracted the coronavirus locally. Three men from Mexico – Bonifacio Eugenio Romero, 31, Rogelio Munoz Santos, 24, and Juan Lopez Chaparro, 55 – have died.

A live-streamed memorial at the Blessed Sacrament Catholic church in Burford, Ont., took place Sunday night to honour Mr. Lopez Chaparro, a father of four with a wife and grandchildren. He was among the roughly 200 migrant workers at Scotlynn Group's produce farm, in Vittoria, who tested positive. "He loved his family dearly and did all he could to better their lives," the church said in a statement ahead of the tribute. Mr. Lopez Chaparro's family is making funeral arrangements back home in Mexico.

The pandemic has exacerbated problems in the Temporary Foreign Worker program, particularly as it relates to overcrowded on-farm housing and precarious immigration status. Earlier this month, Ottawa promised to overhaul the federal program.

Canada's top public-health official is also evaluating Ontario's new guidelines on asymptomatic workers who test positive. Other health experts are decrying the strategy as dangerous and discriminatory against migrant workers, who often don't feel empowered to assert their labour rights because their status in the country is tied to their status with a particular employer.

Chief Public Health Officer Theresa Tam said she will be seeking more information from her Ontario colleagues about the approach. "It's something that sounds kind of new and it needs to be looked at carefully and evaluated as well," Dr. Tam said at a daily briefing late last week.

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She said that "people can begin to have symptoms any time during that incubation period and potentially can get sick fairly fast." She also said a federal infection-prevention expert is now on the ground in the province to offer advice and to support the needs of the workers "because this is, for sure, a vulnerable population."

At the same briefing, Employment Minister Carla Qualtrough, who is responsible for the TFW program, made comments at odds with Ontario's new messaging on asymptomatic workers who test positive: "We're telling workers across sectors and across employers not to work if they have signs [of], or even if they've tested positive for, COVID. Until you're no longer positive, you can still pass on and transmit the virus."

Health Canada said in an e-mail Sunday that the public should be aware that the virus can be spread by people who test positive but are asymptomatic. The department, which includes the Public Health Agency of Canada, said that other than the federally mandated quarantine for international travellers, it is not up to Ottawa to determine workplace regulations.

"As such, it is up to provincial and territorial jurisdictions to establish guidelines that best fit their local realities and specific circumstances," the department said.

Under Ontario's new protocol, employers are responsible for ensuring that asymptomatic workers who test positive are grouped together and kept separate from those who test

negative. It is unclear who is responsible for monitoring compliance with such requirements, since inspections of workplaces and accommodations are already a jurisdictional quagmire.

David Fisman, an epidemiologist with the University of Toronto's Dalla Lana School of Public Health, said the new guidance increases the risk that migrant farm workers will transmit and acquire COVID-19. It will also have repercussions, he said, for the general public.

“By failing to control disease transmission in this hot spot, you’re also creating vulnerabilities for other populations in that same region,” Dr. Fisman said.

He noted that many migrant agri-food workers do their jobs indoors, in greenhouses that are effectively “dry tinder” for the virus to spread. The approach suggests the province is prioritizing economic output over the safety of workers, he said, which is “inconsistent with both Canadian values and international standards.”

University of Ottawa epidemiologist Ronald Labonté said the guidelines are emblematic of the balancing act that authorities are performing around the world: weighing economic considerations against public-health goals.

“In the absence of improved living and working conditions and effective monitoring and enforcement of violations, [the guidance] is unlikely to offer farm workers the same level of protection being advocated for others,” Dr. Labonté said in an e-mail.

Ontario’s Chief Medical Officer of Health, David Williams, has defended the new policy, saying it was adopted out of respect for farm workers who want to keep doing their jobs and earn a living.

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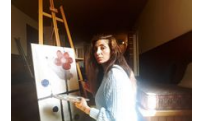
OPINION

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JOHN IBBITSON



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