



MEMO TO THE TRANSITION TEAM OF PRESIDENT-ELECT BARACK OBAMA FROM THE ASSOCIATION OF FARMWORKER OPPORTUNITY PROGRAMS—PART I

The Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs (AFOP) is the national federation of nonprofit and public agencies that operate job-training programs for America's migrant and seasonal farmworkers. These programs are funded by grants competed nationally by the United States Department of Labor under Title I, Section 167 of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). It is one of just a few national programs in the WIA. It serves nationally over 18,000 eligible farmworkers each year with job training, placement, and emergency services.

Farmwork is extremely dangerous, backbreaking labor characterized by incredibly low wages, few or no benefits, and no job security. The average farmworker is able to work only about sixty percent of the year, as crops ripen at different times in different places. The 2.5 million workers seldom take advantage of public benefits available to them, and despite the strong efforts of farm labor unions, only a tiny percentage have the benefits and protections of organized labor. **The programs that AFOP members operate offer workers access to new careers that allow their families to survive and prosper.**

In each year of the Bush Administration, the President has tried to eliminate this program. Each year, Congress has restored it. The results are that since 2001 over 44,000 farmworkers have been trained and placed into careers that pay life-sustaining wages with benefits.

Fifty-two organizations operate this program. They are located in 49 states and Puerto Rico. The programs serve only those authorized workers who are below the poverty level—an extremely difficult eligibility requirement. Most are Hispanic, with Spanish being their first language. Most have not graduated high school, and often read at a sixth grade or lower level.

The majority of the 340 offices of AFOP's member agencies are located in rural America, far from the One Stop Career Center system created under the WIA. Even where One Stops are nearby, it is difficult for the "mainline" system to serve this population. AFOP member agencies employ staff with the cultural and linguistic skills farmworkers need, and they operate under flexible hours. They go where the farmworker are: labor camps, fields, stores, churches, etc. In some areas, they have deployed mobile units to serve wide geographic areas.

While the agricultural sector is small in comparison to the major economic sections of America, AFOP believes that the Obama Administration should re-invest in farmworkers in order to assure that America has a steady, safe and secure homegrown food supply. That investment should include a substantial increase in programs that work to alleviate the economic suffering of this vital, yet poorly paid portion of the workforce.

SHORT-TERM FUNDING RECOMMENDATION: The \$80 million in job training funds for Section 167 WIA are pitifully small. That allows a participation rate of probably less than 2% of the eligible population. The funds should be increased by at least 50% to \$120 million, with the new funds targeted to meet the workforce development needs of older farmworker youth who have dropped out of school—a population doomed to repeat the cycle of poverty absent intervention.

SHORT-TERM SYSTEM RECOMMENDATIONS: while we have strong beliefs about how the overall WIA system should be reformed, the immediate need is to eliminate as many barriers to service as possible for the Section 167 program. The income eligibility should be increased to 100% of the Lower Living Standard Income Level, year-round incumbent workers (such as dairy



workers) should be eligible, and those that toil in food packing, fishing and logging should be eligible for these vital services. Finally, this program must be kept national. Nearly half of those served by this program migrate among several states to find work. Governors should not have to decide which state ought to serve a worker who is resident in their state for only a few weeks.

LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS: Stabilizing the agricultural sector will take many forms. A companion memo will address ways of serving the industry's workers through the United States Department of Agriculture.

Under a reauthorized WIA, we believe the federal government must re-invest in the American workforce. Over the past eight years, there has been an acceleration of reduced funding for job training, placing America at a competitive disadvantage with its competitors and leaving low-skilled workers to fend for themselves. There should be a refocus on low-wage workers, and a mandate that the federal investment focus on job training rather than a sequence of services that often leaves training as a last resort. Incentives in the system should guarantee that those most in need of training get it. In addition there must be a renewed effort to recognize the workforce development needs of rural America, including but not limited to agricultural workers. Workforce development tools that urban One Stops use are often not available or not viable in rural or frontier areas. Innovative approaches must be employed to reach difficult to serve populations.

For the needs of farmworkers and their families, the best approach the Obama Administration could take would be to recognize that the panoply of services (migrant health, education, Head Start, job training, HEP/CAMP, etc.) needs a coordinated approach at the federal level. Eligibility requirements vary, funding formulas and allocations vary, and federal efforts are not maximized for efficiency. There should be assurances that national programs will be utilized to serve this national population, and that there will be mandates to the federal agencies to coordinate efforts to make the best use of scarce funds. The President should appoint a "czar" that reports to him to maximize and expand the federal investment in the farm labor workforce.

Finally, immigration reform is essential to a healthy farm labor sector. Currently, only American citizens or those legally authorized to work in America are eligible for AFOP members' programs, yet over 50% of the agricultural workforce is undocumented. This is untenable. The AgJOBS bill continues to languish from lack of leadership. Industry, labor and advocacy groups agree that it must be passed. President Obama should lead the fight to pass this legislation so important to farmworkers and their children.

For further information contact:

David A. Strauss, Executive Director
Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs
1726 M Street, N.W.
Suite 800
Washington, D.C. 20036

Telephone: 202-828-6006, ext 101
Email: strauss@afop.org