



**Statement of Vicente Reyes**

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**Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship**

**“Immigrants as Essential Workers During COVID-19”**

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Chairwoman Lofgren, Ranking Member Buck, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

My name is Vicente Reyes. I'm a farmworker, a student, and a member of the UFW Foundation, a sister organization of the United Farm Workers union. The UFW Foundation is a non-profit organization that provides critical services and resources to farmworker and immigrant communities in the country's leading agricultural areas.

I currently work in agriculture throughout the year, during the week, on weekends and holidays, and during the summer. As a second-year student at Bakersfield College, I plan my school schedule around my work because I need the money to pay for my tuition, school supplies, and help my parents pay the bills. My dream is to pursue a career in Robotics Engineering.

Although I am a DACA holder, my parents are undocumented. For ten years, I have worked with my parents harvesting avocados, carrots, onions, tangerines, beets, kale, lettuce, and potatoes in Kern County, California. I currently harvest table-grapes. California is the leading agricultural state in the nation in cash receipts (CDFA, 2019, p.2) and is home to the largest number of farmworkers (USDA-NASS, 2019, p.340).

My parents migrated from Mexico to the United States in 2005, when I was five years old. In 2010, we moved to Bakersfield, CA, where we began to work in the fields for the first time in our lives. Before then, my father worked in construction and as a line cook, while my mother worked as a housekeeper in the hotel industry.

I was only 12-years-old and just a 6th grader when I personally learned about the brutal work and personal sacrifice that farm labor requires. Before I even finished the 8th grade, I had spent several seasons harvesting onions. It was hard work. When you harvest onions, you are on the hot ground and without shade for hours, moving up and down the rows on your hands and knees.

As a child, I remember hiding when the supervisors would drive by. I wanted to help my family financially, but I feared that they may identify me as being too young and kick me out of the field. I found out later that kids as young as 12-years-old can work in agriculture, as long as it's outside of school hours (DOL, 2020). For many farmworker families like mine, many children must work because of economic necessity. Surveys show that at the national level, a farmworker family makes between \$20,000 to \$24,999 per year (NAWS, 2019, p.36).

My parents and I have not stopped working in the fields despite fearing deportation when we hear about ICE raids in agriculture. When the pandemic started, we were unable to shelter-in-place because we were designated as essential critical infrastructure workers.

After the designation we wondered what it would mean to be essential and undocumented during this public health crisis. My parents were terrified and we asked ourselves:

- Could we get to work without being stopped or cited by the police because we're driving during the shelter-in-place orders?
- If the nation is relying on us to work, will employers provide us with protections and essential benefits if we get sick?
- And if our work is essential, would we be protected from detention and deportation?

In general, but especially during the pandemic, my parents have been afraid of driving to work. They always worry that they may be deported if Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents pick them up on their way to work. Some farmworkers were afraid that it would be easier to be singled out for deportation during the pandemic, so they didn't show up for work at all.

For my parents, their fear compels them to wake us up at 4:00 a.m. every day to say goodbye. They hug us as if every morning could be our last together. We work hard to help feed the country, yet we live with the constant fear of family separation.

## **ESSENTIAL WORK DOES NOT MEAN ESSENTIAL PROTECTIONS**

I know firsthand that being an essential worker does not mean that we get more protections. I am aware that the agricultural industry has received billions of dollars in COVID-19 legislation (USDA, 2020), yet no one in our family or in our crew has received masks, special instructions about workplace safe distancing, anti-bacterial soap, or hand sanitizer. Not once has our employer screened us for symptoms. Our portable restrooms get cleaned once a week, if at all.

Everything at work runs as if the pandemic doesn't exist even though Kern County has over 30,000 cases of COVID-19 and nearly 400 people have died from the virus (Kern County Public Health Services Department, 2020). I certainly haven't felt like an essential employee. If we get any COVID-19 information or masks to protect ourselves, it's through organizations like the UFW Foundation and the United Farm Workers (UFW) union.

To support farmworkers whose employers are not providing them with basic personal protective equipment (PPE) and to address some of the most basic needs affecting farmworkers and agricultural communities during COVID-19, as of September 17, 2020, the UFW Foundation has distributed:

- 189,000 meals in partnership with Chef Jose Andres' World Central Kitchen.
- nearly 26,000 food boxes in rural California

- more than 100,000 face masks in California, Oregon and Washington State

The mask distributions are part of an ongoing effort to provide more than 900,000 face masks in three states that are among the top five for farmworkers in the nation: California ranks first in the nation in the number of farmworkers (USDA-NASS, 2019, p.340); Washington state ranks second (USDA-NASS, 2019, p.347); and Oregon ranks fifth (USDA-NASS, 2019, p.349).

I am grateful that my family has not been infected with COVID-19, but my parents tell me that some workers who arrive at work ill are not turned away by the crew boss. They are encouraged to keep working. This makes me think that picking the crops is more important than protecting our lives and health by ensuring that we are not exposed to sick workers.

I also know that many farmworkers are barely making ends meet and are afraid to test positive for COVID-19 because this would require them to quarantine at home, without being able to work. The quarantine period could mean that farmworkers would be unable to pay their rent and utility bills, or even provide food for their families.

Ironically, although farmworkers are risking illness to feed the country, for some families, the pandemic has exacerbated their own food insecurity. For farmworkers whose children rely on school meals, the inability to attend school has meant additional burdens on the family to make up for the meals that their kids would usually get at school. Although Kern County schools offered families the opportunity to pick up meals between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m., you can't access the meals during working hours or if you lack transportation. Studies of migrant and seasonal farmworker have found that food insecurity rates range from 50 to 65 percent of the population. Additionally, national surveys of farmworkers show that 55 percent of farmworkers reported having minors in their household (NAWS, 2019, p.8):

- 53 percent had children younger than the age 6
- 65% had children ages 6-13, and
- 38% had children ages 14-17

All of these challenges are exacerbated for undocumented farmworkers due to our lack of access to benefits and our fear of deportation. When it comes to injustices at work, employers know that we don't speak out because we are fearful of deportation and other repercussions. If we get fired, we won't qualify for unemployment insurance. If we get sick, we lack employment-based benefits such as health care. And if we ask our employers for sick pay, we may not be allowed to return to work.

While performing backbreaking work to feed the nation, we are exposed to extreme heat, pesticides, to the risk of getting COVID-19, and more recently, to air that's dangerous to breathe

because of the wildfires. We are at the core of the food supply chain and we're also its first responders when extreme weather threatens to devastate the harvest, yet we lack many basic protections and many of us live with the daily fear of deportation. The air in Bakersfield, CA is some of the worst in the nation. According to the American Lung Association's (ALA) State of the Air Report, Bakersfield, CA ranks #3 for ozone pollution, #1 for year-round particle pollution, and #2 for short-term particle pollution (ALA, 2020). These air pollutants threaten our health and lives.

When you work outdoors, poor air quality is nearly impossible to escape and wildfires across California threaten to worsen our working conditions. To protect ourselves from unhealthy air, dust, pesticides, and COVID-19, fellow workers wear bandanas over their face. The nearest wildfire is about 42 miles east of Bakersfield, CA and although we're experiencing hazy skies, our crew has yet to experience the worst, such as the smoke-filled air and ash that farmworkers in other parts of California are exposed to (Mahoney, 2020). Despite the terrible air quality, we have not missed a day of work.

## **LEGALIZATION WOULD MAKE A MEANINGFUL DIFFERENCE IN OUR LIVES**

Our lives would be so different if we didn't have to worry about detention and deportation.

Legalization would mean that:

- We could feel more secure as essential workers because we would not fear immigration enforcement or police stops and would have access to a social safety net if we were to fall ill or be quarantined.
- We could seek better wages, benefits and working conditions without fear of job loss or threats of deportation.
- We could visit family abroad to be part of important family events or when loved ones are sick or dying. Before the pandemic hit, we had two back to back deaths in my family and we weren't able to mourn with our family. When you're undocumented, you can't even travel to attend funerals in your home country.
- We could live and support our communities without the daily fear of deportation.

The nation is relying on the labor of immigrant and undocumented workers to get through this pandemic. There are 9.6 million immigrants that are essential workers and among them, 5.5 million are undocumented (Kerwin et al., 2020, p.2). Studies show that undocumented workers provide \$1 trillion to the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), generate approximately \$190 billion in government revenue and \$63 billion for California alone (Hinojosa et al., 2020, p.4)

My family are among the 5.5 million essential workers that are undocumented. We are also part of the broader 11 million undocumented immigrants (Karmarck & Stenglein, 2019) that are an essential part of your communities. We support local businesses, volunteer in schools, worship

in local churches, and work side by side with countless Americans. Although we make significant contributions to this country, we live with an endless fear and uncertainty about what tomorrow may bring.

I want the nation to know that undocumented immigrants have a hand in the fruit juice and milk that you drink, the fruits you provide your children to snack on, the nutritious salads that nourish you throughout the day and the wine you drink after a long day of remote work. Undocumented immigrants not only cultivate and harvest the nation's crops, they pack them, process them, transport them, stock them at your nearest grocery store; they greet you at the cash register, cook for you and serve your food at your local restaurant or deliver your meal to your front door. And, although farmworkers are the least visible workers in the food supply chain, without our labor, the entire food supply chain would collapse.

Farmworkers and the rest of our nation's undocumented immigrants deserve a path to legalization and citizenship that recognizes the essential role that we play in this nation.

The country is relying on us and we rely on you to recognize our contributions and the many ways in which our health, lives and well-being are interconnected.

Thank you.

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