

One Weekend in Maine

MaineHousing

Special Achievement: COVID-19 Response

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Tourism and agriculture are vital components of Maine's economy. During the summer and fall, the highways and backroads are filled with visitors "from away": here to enjoy vistas, coastlines, local events and fresh seafood and produce.

In 2020 the pandemic kept most of us at home and tourists away - traffic was sparse, highways were eerily quiet and hotels/motels/inns were empty. However, one annual Maine event that is often unnoticed and unappreciated continued: the migration of season workers who come to Maine from mid-summer to the end of year to harvest the iconic Maine blueberry, pick apples, collect fir boughs, and make holiday wreaths. Our economy is dependent on seasonal workers. These workers support local economies by purchasing groceries, gasoline, and other basic needs and are critical to the statewide agricultural economic system. Unlike every other part of 2020, agricultural resources continued to grow and needed to be harvested, without concern for COVID-19.

Each year, an influx of over 500 migrant workers arrive to harvest or perform other activities associated with Maine agriculture. Working collaboratively with state, local, non-profit, and business partners, MaineHousing led efforts to establish testing sites and quarantine & isolation shelters that provided migrant farm workers with healthcare, translation services, cultural brokering, and on-site staffing.

This comprehensive system was put together over the course of one weekend, when it became clear that the existing infrastructure would not be able to meet the needs of these workers - both from a physical space perspective, but also as a culturally competent and person-centered response. We knew that migrant farm workers had the potential to fall through the cracks - and knew that they are a traditionally underserved group. We didn't let that happen - we already had a few months of providing hotel shelter and operational support to many other people in Maine, we had the relationships and the experience to do this quickly and effectively.

The first five people who were tested all tested positive; all 40 of the people they traveled with needed to quarantine. However, all positive people - and their close contacts - were given the care they needed before they made it to the farm or their housing on the farm. Our quick work prevented further spread of COVID-19 throughout Maine and among other workers. After their quarantine and isolation, the workers were able to continue to work, providing their much needed wages to their families back home - and providing Maine with the economic benefit of their work.

Maine Mobile Health Program, a Federally Qualified Health Center that serves migrant farm workers, stood up mobile testing clinics for farm workers upon arrival to the state or work site. Individuals that tested positive for COVID-19, or had been in close contact with an individual who tested positive, needed space to safely isolate or quarantine. This was largely impossible to do on the farm due to the congregate nature of the housing.

“Thank you for moving mountains to get the Bangor location and staffing in place in short order. The benefits to local communities, our employees, the individuals quarantined, and our company are vast. I thank you all.

- Tony Shurman, Wymans 

MaineHousing stepped in and contracted with hotels to provide quarantine & isolation shelter (including meals) for individuals diagnosed with COVID-19 or who had been in close contact with and individual diagnosed with COVID-19. In parallel to the contracts with hotels, MaineHousing contracted with Mano en Mano, to provide onsite management and support services to the individuals in isolation or quarantine. On-site staffing was provided by teams who spoke the primary language of the people utilizing the hotel. We made sure that the meals provided were culturally appropriate and responsive to the needs of the guests.

Following that first weekend, Tony Shurman the President and CEO of Wymans and a Maine company that hires migrant farm workers, sent a note to MaineHousing staff and partners:

A quick note of gratitude in the midst of this extremely busy and challenging time for all. Thank you for moving mountains to get the Bangor location and staffing in place in short order. As you likely know well, it was put to use immediately on availability. The benefits to local communities, our employees, the individuals quarantined, and our company are vast. I thank you all.

As workers continued to arrive, we made some adjustments. Following that first wave of migrant farm workers, we centralized testing at the hotel upon their arrival so they didn't need to travel to the farms where they would work and then back for testing. We made sure throughout the process that we were analyzing the issues from every angle - and that we were adjusting our strategies based on what we were learning in the moment.

The organizations that hire the farm workers provided wages during worker's quarantine period to help ensure compliance with isolation and quarantine guidance, and ensure the workers were able to earn the much needed money they had anticipated in travelling to Maine for work.

Without MaineHousing and our partners' fast response and agility, the migrant farm worker experience could have been very different - and perhaps deadly and more of a strain on Maine's rural healthcare system. We are proud of the work we did with our partners to save lives and to show that every person in Maine deserves the proper care and support - whether they're "from away" or whether their family has lived here for generations.