



TO: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

FROM: Christopher Mackie, Medical Officer of Health

DATE: 2020 September 17

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## COVID-19 SURVEILLANCE TESTING ON FARMS

### **Recommendation**

*It is recommended that Report No. 042-20 re: “COVID-19 Surveillance Testing on Farms” be received for information.*

### **Key Points**

- Surveillance testing of migrant farm workers (MFWs) for COVID-19 was undertaken in July 2020 for select farms in the Middlesex-London region. This initiative was prompted by the occurrence of outbreaks amongst this population in other jurisdictions in Southern Ontario.
- The MFW community has been identified at high risk for COVID-19 outbreaks due to congregate living environments and barriers to health care and testing.
- The campaign concluded on August 21, 2020. Approximately 64% of MFWs in the Middlesex-London region were tested and no positive cases were identified among migrant farm workers during the surveillance campaign.
- MLHU will continue to support employers and workers on farms to ensure that preventive steps are in place to limit the transmission of COVID-19.

### **Background**

Migrant farm workers (MFWs) are employed by many farms in southwestern Ontario. With an estimated 150-200 workers in the Middlesex-London region, the scale of the migrant farmers in this jurisdiction is smaller than other neighbouring communities. Some workers live in congregate housing on the farm whereas others live in the community. Of the approximately 50 farms who employ migrant farmers in London and Middlesex, most have less than 10. A majority of the workers are employed by 3-4 farms. All of these farms also employ local workers who live in the community. The Health Unit has been working with farms since the early spring, including liaison with public health inspectors to introduce preventive actions.

Outbreaks of COVID-19 amongst MFWs in neighbouring jurisdictions has highlighted three key characteristics about this population: (1) these workers are not positioned to easily disclose symptoms of COVID-19, (2) the congregate living settings where workers live are areas of rapid transmission, and (3) barriers to health care and testing exist.

Given these characteristics, proactive testing of asymptomatic individuals had the potential to play a uniquely important role in supporting the wellbeing of this community and minimizing transmission of COVID-19. In partnership with Ontario Health, the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA), and the Middlesex-London Paramedic Services (MLPS), Middlesex-London Health Unit (MLHU) organized a surveillance testing initiative of MFWs in the London-Middlesex region. Farms were identified for surveillance testing was based on the number of migrant workers employed by a particular farm and the level of risk as assessed by the Public Health Inspector. Farms were ranked by Public Health Inspectors familiar with the farms as moderate to high risk based on number of MFWs employed by that farm and whether they were living congregate settings.

### **Process**

To increase acceptability from the farmers for the testing, public health inspectors who had developed working relationships in the past were the first point of contact. Once notification had occurred, additional members of the MLHU team supported the mobilization of on-site testing.

There was hesitancy from both farm owners and MFWs regarding the need for surveillance testing. One of the most prevalent concerns from operators included the possibility of exposing their workers to the mobile team. Fortunately, the previously established relationships between MLHU and farm owners ensured fulsome discussions could occur, providing reassurance that testing could happen safely. In the end, all identified farms agreed to have on-site testing.

The expectation for the farm owners was that they ensured all MFWs had an opportunity for testing. If interpreters were required, MLHU provided this service at the time of testing. Community paramedics from MLPS were instrumental in performing all the testing at the sites. Testing started in early July, and the initiative concluded on August 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020. Of the 137 eligible MFWs, 87 or 64% were tested.

### **Next Steps**

MLHU will continue to support employers and workers on farms to ensure that preventive steps are in place to limit the transmission of COVID-19. The initiative highlighted the importance of established and respectful working relationships with community partners and emphasized the need for ongoing work to support the health of MFWs.

This report was prepared by the Incidence Management System (IMS) Operations section and the Associate Medical Officer of Health.



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