

## NC COVID-19 Farmworker Vaccination Monthly Newsletter—October 2021

*Created by the Office of Rural Health, NC Farmworker Health Program and the Division of Public Health, Communicable Disease Branch.*

The NC Department of Health and Human Services has implemented the COVID-19 Farmworker Vaccination Plan to get farmworkers vaccinated as quickly as possible.

**This month we celebrate 26,790 total doses administered!**

### Sharing Our Successes

#### **The NC State Extension Farm Safety Project: Measuring Change through Collaboration**

While Ángel Gaona and Olivia Antonio-Ventura are relatively new to the North Carolina Cooperative Extension, they are not new to the struggles that farmworkers face.



Olivia Antonio Ventura provides health education to farmworkers

“I personally have farmworker experience,” Antonio-Ventura shared. “That was my first job as a young girl.” As a college student, Gaona participated in the Into the Fields program with Student Action with Farmworkers, working full-time for 10 weeks with the NC Farmworkers Project out of Benson, NC. He, too, is proud to come from a family of farmworkers.

Now they are both educators with the Farm Safety Project, a collaboration between the NC Farmworker Health Program at NC DHHS and the Extension Farmworker Health and Safety Program at NC State Extension. The purpose of the project is to assist farmers, farm labor contractors, farmworkers and their families with reducing the risks of COVID-19 transmission on the farm, increase access to COVID-19 information and services (including testing, vaccination, and medical care), and assist with response efforts in the case of an outbreak.

Gaona shares that when he first got the position, “I would imagine myself telling the farmworkers that when I see them, I see myself and my family. That’s how they started their lives in the US, in agriculture. I myself have experience working in agriculture from a very young age.”



Roberto Rosales and Olivia Antonio Ventura pose with former Farm Safety Team member Javier Rivera

Lead Farmworker Health and Safety Educator Roberto Rosales explains, “The Farm Safety team was created in response to COVID-19 and the challenges it brought to the agriculture community. It built on the Farmworker Health and Safety Education program model that provided education to farmworkers on health and safety on the farm.”

The program has traditionally focused on topics such as pesticides, heat stress and green tobacco illness. With COVID-19, education on the virus and the vaccine were included and prioritized in the

curriculum. In addition to on-farm education, the Farm Safety Team has also been instrumental in the distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE) and helping farmers connect to governmental and community resources. This team of knowledgeable and approachable professionals has been able to connect groups that previously may not have been working together, even though they were working with the same population.

Both Gaona and Antonio-Ventura speak to these collaborative efforts. Counties in their service region are divided among them, and they each work with the local farmworker vaccine teams, churches, volunteer organizations and others to make vaccinations more accessible to farmworkers, who face numerous challenges in accessing basic health care, including limited transportation, long workdays and language barriers.

Antonio-Ventura shares that “a lot of people don’t understand that farmworkers don’t have an option if they’re sick. If you don’t work, you don’t get paid. They don’t have insurance to cover their costs. This was before COVID even.” Remembering her own childhood, she adds, “When we got sick, no one wanted to go to the doctor. We were scared of the costs of medical bills: what if I have to get more done? How do I pay for that? Sometimes they have a language barrier, then there’s the long waits, or the schedules at the hospitals and clinics. Transportation...”

Gaona agrees, “Being an H-2A worker, coming in from another country, a lot of people don’t realize how difficult that position can be, especially during COVID and especially if it’s their first time here. COVID has been very frightening for them, especially with shared housing and when someone in their house or farm tested positive. And even without COVID it’s a hard position to be in. That social aspect for H-2A workers isn’t really there. They make the most out of what they’re given based on the situation they are in.”

Working with the county agencies, health departments and nonprofits, they have been able to vaccinate farmworkers, distribute PPE and clothing, and educate the agricultural community about prevention measures. All the while, they have been building a stronger, more cohesive community.

“I’ve seen a lot of network building, and I think people have noticed the benefits of that,” said Gaona. “Farmers contact us more now when situations arise.”

Antonio-Ventura adds, “We have never seen this collaboration before, but we now have so many resources and partners that are willing to come together to help our Hispanic community. If I would have had these resources when I was working, I would have appreciated it a lot. Since I didn’t, I know they appreciate all the support and resources.”

Antonio-Ventura and Gaona both commented that their hope is that farmworkers be recognized as essential members of North Carolina’s agricultural community. “Agricultural work in general is a humble job,” said Antonio-Ventura. “It isn’t one that everyone would want, because of the long hours outside in the heat or in the cold. If I hadn’t been part of the agricultural community, I wouldn’t be who I am now.”

Gaona describes farmworkers as “one of the most hardworking portions of the community. Often, they are in the background, they don’t speak up much, but because of efforts like this, we can help them and encourage them any way we can.”

As they exchanged stories of successful events, characterized by lines of farmworker families waiting to be vaccinated, and made possible by community-wide collaborations, Gaona commented, “That’s how success can be measured, when we look back and see how much change has taken place and the impact we continue to have.”

## **Vaccination Program Updates**

This month’s focus has been on boosters, now that all adult farmworkers who received their initial vaccine series are eligible to receive one. Additional areas of focus include increasing outreach to newly arriving seafood workers, increasing access to monoclonal antibody treatment for eligible farmworkers, reducing the risk of workers who are transferring from Eastern North Carolina to Western North Carolina to work in Christmas trees, and preparing for pediatric vaccines.

## **By the Numbers: A Look at the Data**

The farmworker vaccination plan was initiated statewide on March 3, 2021. Local teams are tasked to complete an online survey every two weeks to track their progress, including the number of farmworkers vaccinated through their efforts and the number of workers who they are aware declined vaccination. According to reported data, vaccine acceptance among the overall farmworker population continues to be high.

From April 9 to October 29, there were 38 vaccination events held at the reception hub in a centralized location, providing 4,843 vaccine doses to H-2A workers. October 22 was the last day of H-2A arrivals and when the reception hub became a departure hub, offering vaccines, boosters and testing to workers as they transfer to other farms or depart North Carolina. The departure hub is scheduled to continue through Thanksgiving. The summary of the data below through October 29, 2021, is from the reception hub and as reported by the local teams.

Vaccination effort	Doses administered	Number fully vaccinated
<b>Local teams</b>	<b>21,947</b>	<b>9,569</b>
Initial series*	21,926	
Boosters	21	
<b>Reception hub</b>	<b>4,843</b>	<b>4,403</b>
Initial series	4,794	
Boosters	49	
<b>Total</b>	<b>26,790</b>	<b>13,972</b>

*\*Includes doses administered when type of dose not reported.*

*Data limitations: Survey data provide a snapshot of local team efforts, not a complete picture of farmworker vaccine access and uptake. These numbers are expected to be undercounts and do not include people vaccinated independently of local teams and reception hub events. Occupation data are not routinely collected during vaccine registration. Additional data are pending from 8 of 100 local teams.*

*Overall number of vaccinations includes farmworkers, farmers and farm staff members.*

If you have any questions or concerns, please email us at  
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