Housing Challenges and Systemic Inequities Amongst Migrant Farmworkers in Vermont's Dairy Industry

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Abstract

This paper investigates and addresses the housing challenges faced by migrant dairy farmworkers in the state of Vermont. Using a variety of sources, drawing from quantitative and qualitative data, topics explored include the demographics of migrant dairy farmworkers in Vermont, their housing conditions, legal and regulatory frameworks regarding housing and how these pertains to migrant dairy farmworkers. It also discusses existing policy solutions, proposals, community innovation, and recommended actions to address systemic housing challenges faced by migrant dairy farmworkers in Vermont.

This research paper finds that migrant dairy farmworkers are facing systemic housing challenges due to economic pressures, immigration policy, insufficient worker protections, and cultural barriers. Addressing these deep-rooted issues is essential through collaboration on a clear, actionable plan, securing funding, and fostering a commitment to sustainable housing initiatives. This paper also finds that enacting comprehensive housing reform to improve living conditions for migrant dairy farmworkers in Vermont is necessary through the collaboration of various stakeholders, including migrant farmworkers, employers, community organizations, and policymakers in order to develop adequate, sustainable, and affordable housing solutions. The findings of this paper underscore that addressing this housing crisis is both a moral obligation, and critical for the long-term sustainability of Vermont's dairy industry.

Housing Challenges and Systemic Inequities Amongst Migrant Farmworkers in Vermont's Dairy Industry

Migrant farmworkers are the backbone of Vermont's dairy industry, playing a critical role in the state's agricultural economy. The dairy industry relies heavily on migrant labor, with primarily Mexican and some Guatemalan migrants making up over half of the workforce (Baker, 2021). Since Vermont is responsible for 63% of the region's milk supply, they make a critical contribution to New England's milk production. However, migrant dairy farmworkers face immense challenges in terms of wages, working hours, health risks, social isolation, and their living conditions (Pannikar & Barett, 2021). This makes the issue of migrant farmworker housing extremely important to address. For migrant dairy farmworkers in Vermont, housing is hard to access off-farm, so it is often included as a non-wage benefit provided by employers on-farm. In either circumstance it is typically substandard, overcrowded, and poorly maintained (Baker, 2021).

This paper explores housing challenges faced by migrant dairy farmworkers in Vermont, emphasizing the financial, social, and health-related impacts that arise from inadequate housing. Drawing on data from surveys, reports, and case studies, this paper will examine the intersection of economic constraints, immigration policies, and farmworker rights, highlighting how these factors exacerbate poor living conditions. This research overall seeks to shed light on the broader systemic inequalities present within Vermont's agricultural sector, with a focus on the dairy industry, as it pertains to migrants, and the current efforts being made to improve the well-being of this demographic.

The important role of migrant dairy farmworkers in Vermont

Vermont is famous for its agricultural landscapes and the importance of the dairy industry within the state is well known. Annually, dairy contributes roughly $2.2 billion to the state economy, supplying over half of the milk in New England as well as about 1% of the national milk supply (Pannikar & Barett, 2021). In Vermont alone, dairy accounts for 70% of agricultural sales, supports thousands of jobs, and takes up about 80% of Vermont's farmland (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2022). This makes the dairy industry and the farmworkers who support it incredibly important to the functioning and the sustainability of this agricultural sector within the state.

Migrant labor is critical to the functioning of the dairy market both nationally and in Vermont. Vermont dairy farmers rely heavily on migrant labor, especially in a competitive and subsidized milk market (Baker, 2021). Employing immigrants, particularly undocumented immigrants, allows farms to cut costs as well as to combat the long-term labor shortage that has been plaguing the industry for decades (Drummond, 2021). As a result, about half of Vermont's milk production relies on the hard labor of migrant workers, whom dairy farmers have acknowledged that they could not function without (Migrant Justice, n.d.-b).

Despite the essential work of migrant dairy farmworkers, they face exploitation and numerous systemic challenges as a result of their precarious legal status, lack of support from both employers and the government, as well as cultural and language barriers. Migrant dairy farm workers face dangerous working conditions, long hours, inadequate housing, health risks, social alienation and low wages (Pannikar & Barett, 2021). As per Migrant Justice's "Labor and Housing Conditions on Vermont Dairy Farms 2024 Survey", 87% of migrant dairy farm workers

make less than the state's $13.67 minimum wage, with the median wage they receive being $11.67 – though it is notable that 39% of workers making below minimum wage reported a wage of less than $10 per hour (Migrant Justice, 2024).[1] Along with these low wages, shifts are usually long, and time off for holidays, vacations, illness or personal matters is slim and typically unpaid (Migrant Justice, 2024). The survey results illustrate that 95% of workers work 6-7 days per week, with 97% of workers' shifts lasting over 8 hours, and 51% of workers' shifts lasting over 12 hours per day (Migrant Justice, 2024). This makes a typical work week for migrant dairy farmworkers about 72 hours, rather than the standard 40 hour work week, without overtime compensation (Migrant Justice, 2024). This is possible since the Federal Labor Standards Act excludes dairy farmworkers from their protections (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). Additionally, Vermont state law for overtime requirements, minimum wage, and hourly requirements does not apply to agricultural workers (Farmers Assuring Responsible Management, 2023)

While the presence of dairy farms has been declining over the past 75 years due to a variety of challenges, milk production has increased per cow on remaining farms in order to stay competitive within the industry (Pannikar & Barett, 2021). This has inevitably led to greater reliance and strain on the industry's predominantly migrant labor force who fuel these farms, especially as farm owners and their families seek off-farm income to survive (Pannikar & Barett, 2021). Additionally, as Migrant Justice perfectly illustrates it, "Consolidation and globalization in the food industry allow powerful retail brands to leverage their volume purchasing power and benefit from low prices. This creates downward pressure on farmers' incomes and, ultimately, on farmworkers' wages and working conditions (Migrant Justice, 2025, para. 1). Essentially, while

[1] As of January 1, 2025, VT minimum wage has increased to $14.01 per hour as per the State of Vermont Department of Labor.

large corporations working with dairy farms remain profitable and successful internally, they have put a lot of strain on farmers, in turn decreasing wages and conditions for farmworkers and therefore increasing exploitation within the industry.

Motivations for migration & the attraction of dairy farm jobs in Vermont

Migrant dairy farmworkers sustain over half of the industry, and estimates project that about 90% of them are undocumented (Pannikar & Barett, 2021). Many of these farmworkers predominantly speak Spanish or Indigenous languages, as about 93% have immigrated to the United States from Mexico, with the remaining 7% having immigrated from Guatemala (Pannikar & Barett, 2021).

One of the primary drivers behind migration patterns from Mexico and Guatemala to the United States is agricultural hardship in migrants' home countries. However, it is important to recognize that other significant factors including violence, political instability, limited economic opportunities, and the effects of climate change also contribute to the decision to migrate. Agricultural challenges, in particular, are partly linked to U.S. trade policies, most notably the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2024). NAFTA took effect in 1994, signed by Canada, Mexico and The United States, lifting tariffs and other barriers on a variety of goods being traded between these countries (U.S. Customs & Border Protection, 2024).[2] The effects of NAFTA were contradictory to its goal to lower prices and increase efficiency in Mexican Agriculture; food prices in Mexico rose immensely, and the regulations favored large corporations, further consolidating the industry and putting pressure on small-scale farms (Garcia-Galindo, 2023). Further, the reduction of government subsidies for

[2] NAFTA ceased in 2020 to be replaced by the United States - Mexico - Canada Agreement (USMCA)

farmers exacerbated the already fragile state of Mexican agriculture. Prior to NAFTA, agriculture was economically critical in Mexico, accounting for 7% of GDP and 24% of employment, mostly made up of small-scale farms (Garcia-Galindo, 2023). NAFTA's rapid liberalization of trade disrupted rural labor markets, pushing small farmers to migrate to urban areas or to the U.S. in search of better opportunities (Garcia-Galindo, 2023). As a result, roughly 2 million farmers were forced to migrate as a direct consequence of these hardships, nearly doubling migration to the U.S. from Mexico since NAFTA (Migrant Justice, n.d.-b).

Unfortunately, migration to the United States presents its own challenges. Firstly, there are legal barriers specific to migrant dairy farmworkers, as there is currently no path for undocumented workers in this industry to obtain legal status. Programs like the H-2A, which enable U.S. employers to hire migrant workers for temporary agricultural jobs through work visas, do not apply to the dairy industry because it operates year-round (Baker, 2021;Mares, 2019). Along with these legal barriers, migrant dairy farm workers face a plethora of social, cultural, and language barriers, leading to safety issues and feelings of isolation amongst the migrant dairy farm worker population. In a survey, migrant dairy workers identified that few farmers in Vermont speak Spanish (or their native, Indigenous language), whilst three-quarters of the worker's surveyed stated that they spoke little to no English, leading to over 60% identifying this barrier as a significant issue (Baker & Wolcott, n.d.).

Based on firsthand accounts from Vermont migrant dairy farm workers, as detailed in *The Most Costly Journey* and *Life on the Other Border: Farmworkers and Food Justice in Vermont*, several common challenges emerge despite the unique experiences of each worker. These challenges include the emotional toll of leaving family behind, the intention to eventually

return home, facing cultural and language barriers, social isolation, and the necessity of migrating to the U.S. to secure financial stability for their families. Migrant workers typically endure long hours, often 10 to 12 hours a day, six to seven days a week (Bennett, et al., 2021;Mares, 2019). The stories make it clear that for many, migrating to work on Vermont dairy farms is a result of compromised agency, in which it is necessary for people to migrate here due to a lack of job opportunities and economic hardship in their home countries.

A significant factor in their decision to migrate to Vermont is the accessibility of farm labor jobs, which do not require formal education. According to *The Most Costly Journey*, 37.4% of these workers have less than an eighth-grade education, making farm labor an appealing option given the lack of other employment opportunities (Bennett, et al., 2021). Furthermore, many migrant workers learn about opportunities in Vermont specifically through relatives who have already made the journey, creating a network of shared knowledge and support. Additionally, many workers have prior experience in agricultural labor from their home countries, making farm work in Vermont a familiar and viable option despite the difficult conditions (Bennett, et al., 2021). While the physical and emotional costs of migration are high, many workers express confidence that this sacrifice is the best option to provide for their families and ensure a better future for their children, free from the same struggles they have endured (Bennett, et al., 2021;Mares, 2019).

Housing legal and regulatory framework

Under Vermont law, there are a myriad of requirements that landlords are supposed to abide by to protect their tenants and provide adequate housing. For instance, 9 V.S.A. § 4457 outlines three sections regarding a warranty of habitability, waiver, and heat and water. It first

states that in a residential rental agreement, landlords must provide safe and clean spaces for human inhabitants, in compliance with building, housing and health regulations, which cannot be waived or else the agreement will be null (Vermont General Assembly, 2010). Subsumed in the implied warrant of habitability is that the landlord must ensure adequate heating facilities, as well as an adequate amount of hot and cold water (Vermont General Assembly, 2010).

The aforementioned building, housing and health regulations outline numerous requirements that landlords must abide by, as well as the rights that tenants hold in Vermont. First, it is established that a tenant-landlord relationship exists in any circumstance where housing is provided in exchange for rent payment or labor. As outlined in the State of Vermont Department of Labor's updated 2025 room and board deduction rates, the permissible deductions from wages for meals and lodging may not surpass $3.81 for breakfast, $4.29 for lunch, $4.77 for dinner, $12.87 daily or $90.09 weekly for full board, $5.26 for nightly lodging, $31.64 weekly for full room, and $109.24 weekly for full room and board (State of Vermont Department of Labor, 2025). In such cases, landlords are legally required to provide sanitary and safe housing that meets building and health codes (Center for Agriculture and Food Systems, 2023). These legal maintenance requirements for landlords can be sectioned into six categories for simplicity: (1) sanitation and cleanliness, (2) housing conditions, (3) essential facilities, (4) water and heating, (5) air and lighting, and (6) safety. The following information in table 1 is based on the *Housing and Employment Rights for Vermont Dairy Workers* handbook, which was updated in 2023 by the Center for Agriculture and Food Systems.

Table 1. **Legal maintenance requirements for landlords in VT**

Category	Requirement
Sanitation and Cleanliness	● Landlords must: ○ Provide trash dumpsters & clean common areas (e.g., hallways, stairs). ○ Exterminate pest infestations.
Housing Conditions	● Landlords must ensure the building is: ○ Weather-tight (prevents rain, snow, and air from entering). ○ Water-tight (prevents water ingress). ○ Rodent-proof (sealed to prevent rodent entry). ○ Dry (maintained to avoid moisture or mold growth). ○ In good repair (ensuring the above conditions are continuously met).
Essential Facilities	● Housing must include a kitchen with: ○ A sink providing both hot and cold drinkable water. ○ Space to store, cook, and eat food. ● Bathroom facilities must: ○ Be in-unit or shared with no more than one other unit, ensuring privacy and ventilation.

	○ Include a flush toilet, sink, and a tub/shower with hot and cold water. ○ Have waterproof counters and doors to prevent moisture and mold buildup.
Water and Heating	● Water: ○ Must be clean & drinkable with adequate pressure & both hot and cold options. ○ If quality is poor, alternative sources (e.g., water jugs or a purification system) must be provided. ● Heating: ○ Landlords must provide heaters capable of maintaining indoor temperatures above 65°F. ○ If the landlord is responsible for heating costs, the heating system must be available when outdoor temperatures fall below 55°F. ○ Heating systems must be vented to the outdoors.
Air and Lighting	● Every room used for living or sleeping must have a window and/or door that can be opened. ● Ventilation must be provided in bathrooms.

	● Access to electricity and light is required, including electrical outlets in living areas and light fixtures in all rooms.
Safety	● Each unit must be equipped with: ○ A fire extinguisher. ○ Working smoke alarms in all bedrooms. ○ Carbon monoxide detectors near sleeping areas. ● Every bedroom must have at least one escape window big enough for a person to climb out.

Along with these landlord requirements, there are a multitude of tenant rights that are legally required. These tenant rights can be sectioned into five categories for simplicity: (1) access to property, (2) guests, (3) access to utilities and belongings, and (4) eviction process. The following information is also based on the *Housing and Employment Rights for Vermont Dairy Workers* handbook, which was updated in 2023 by the Center for Agriculture and Food Systems. These tenant rights are presented in table 2.

Table 2. Tenant rights in VT

Category	Rights
Access to Property	● A landlord can only enter: ○ With your consent, or ○ With 48 hours' notice for inspections, repairs, or showing the unit, or in cases of imminent danger.
Guests	● Tenants may have any guests in their home, which cannot be restricted by landlords.
Access to Utilities and Belongings	● Landlords cannot deny tenants access to their housing or personal belongings or turn off utilities (water, heat).
Eviction Process	● Advanced notice in writing is required before eviction. ● If housing is provided in exchange for labor (e.g., farm employer), they must follow these steps to evict: ○ Provide court notice and schedule a hearing at least 10 days after notice.

	○ Proof of hardship (if they need the space for a new employee) must be shown in court to evict, with a move-out period of 5-30 days. ● If housing is provided in exchange for rent, they must follow these steps to evict: ○ If rent is paid (including by wage deduction), the notice depends on the reason for eviction: ■ Non-payment: 14 days' written notice. ■ Violation of rental agreement: 30 days' written notice. ■ No-fault eviction: Notice period depends on the rental agreement and length of stay.

While these are the legal requirements in Vermont regarding landlord responsibilities and tenant-rights, this does not guarantee that they are obeyed. Additionally, since migrant dairy farmworkers are exempt from the more specific housing protections guaranteed to H-2A visa holders, they face higher risks in terms of poor housing and lack the enforcement of livable standards.

The housing rules and regulations in Vermont for migrant dairy farmworkers (and general renters) fall under the jurisdiction of Act 181, which in 2022 transferred the responsibility to uphold the Residential Rental Housing Health & Safety Code (RRHS) from local health officials to the Division of Fire Safety (Vermont Department of Public Safety, 2023). The purpose of the

RRHS is to uphold the legal standards outlined above, while working on a complaint-based system to address any housing issues that arise. According to Vermont's Department of Public Safety's Division of Fire Safety, this complaint process involves: researching the issue and verifying the code violation, then notifying your landlord through a documented and written request, allowing the landlord time to address the issue (unless it is an immediate safety issue), and then filing a formal complaint with the Division of Fire Safety if the issue was not resolved, which would result in the landlord receiving an inspection report from the fire marshal or health & safety officer (Department of Public Safety, n.d.). Along with this, there is no specific follow-up process after inspection, and there is a lack of data tracking the information regarding these complaints (Reed, 2022).

This process is flawed, especially for migrant dairy farmworkers. While the state laws themselves are clear and aim to protect all renters, it is reasonable to assume that the majority of the migrant dairy farmworker population struggles with both understanding their renting rights, and that they may be hesitant to or lack the tools to file such a complaint if and when issues with housing conditions arise (Reed, 2022). First, many of these laws and resources, along with the complaint form itself, require technology to retrieve, and the ability to speak English. As established previously, the majority of farmworkers on Vermont dairy farms speak little to no English. As a result, this complaint-based methodology is inadequate in ensuring safe, adequate housing for migrant dairy farmworkers. Many farmworkers have also voiced their discomfort with raising housing concerns to their employer, or have shared that their concerns are simply not resolved by their employer (Reed, 2022). Conclusively, while there may be regulations in place, there is inadequate enforcement in place to ensure that these regulations are being properly

followed, especially within vulnerable communities such as the migrant dairy farmworker community.

Visualizing migrant dairy farmworker housing

Housing is a common non-wage benefit provided to dairy farmworkers, more than half of whom are Latino migrants. It is reported that 100% of dairy farms who employ Latino farmworkers provide housing and utilities for them, while the U.S.-born farmworkers have housing provided by about 62% of farms and utilities by 53% of farms (Baker, 2021). Notably, there is a stark difference in the investments in housing for U.S.-born farmworkers versus Latino farmworkers, which is illustrated by survey results outlined by Dan Baker in the "Vermont Migrant Dairy Farmworker Housing Brief". The results indicate that, on average, farmers invest $4,367 in housing per Latino farmworker, while it's estimated that the value invested in housing per U.S.-born farmworker is $14,100 (Baker, 2021).[3]

While housing rules and regulations are in place, many of them are not enforced or being followed, especially within migrant dairy farmworker housing communities. According to Migrant Justice, "Nearly all immigrant dairy workers live in employer-provided housing" and "Conditions are inadequate and unsafe for the vast majority of workers" (Migrant Justice, 2024, pg. 2). These on-farm housing issues are related to documentation status, as well as lack of money and resources to improve conditions. Their survey indicates that 82% face housing issues, involving safety concerns, hygiene and cleanliness, structural problems and lack of privacy, insufficient heating or insulation, and overcrowding and water quality issues (Migrant Justice, 2024). In a 2015 Migrant Justice survey, of the migrant dairy farmworkers surveyed, "...30% of

[3] These results are calculated as a median annual value.

workers report that they have overcrowded housing and a combined 35% consider their housing to be either in need of major repairs or say that housing is so substandard a brand new home is needed" (Migrant Justice, 2015, pg. 2). It can be concluded that part of the reason for these housing issues facing migrant dairy farmworkers stem from discrimination, which was identified by over half of the survey participants, mostly due to language barriers and xenophobia (Migrant Justice, 2024). However, it is important to note that not all farmers discriminate against migrant farmworkers, and many do want to make real improvements to housing, yet they simply lack the time and resources to do so.

The primary challenges that have been identified and need to be addressed in on-farm housing include overcrowding and privacy issues, lack of cleanliness and maintenance, safety issues and insufficient safety measures, poor temperature and moisture control, septic capacity issues, and inadequate appliances (Vermont Housing & Conservation Board, 2021). The *Farmworker Housing Needs Assessment Executive Summary* shares that over half of Vermont's farmworker housing units need repairs of varying severity and cost (Vermont Housing & Conservation Board, 2021).[4] These findings are supported by firsthand accounts, such as the story of Javier who lives above a dairy barn in Addison County.[5] In his story, he shares the plethora of housing issues that he personally faces in his above-barn accommodation. He faces water leakage from his bedroom ceiling and the toilet, which seeps into the kitchen area, and his shower has no head where the water temperature is sometimes scalding, forcing him to mix it with cold water in a bucket in order to bathe. He also has inadequate temperature control facilities that took months for his landlord to poorly resolve, along with a windowless bedroom

[4] Please note that the findings of this report include all farmworker housing, not just migrant dairy farmworker housing.
[5] Javier is shared to be a pseudonym, as the person who shared his story was afraid of backlash from his employer/landlord.

(Reed, 2022). Another farmworker shared that in their small trailer shared by 7 people, there were 5 beds and a couch where someone would sleep in the living room; this illustrates the prevalence of overcrowding in migrant dairy farmworker accommodations (Baker, 2021). These are only a couple of many personal stories that have been shared, illustrating the often illegal issues that are present in on-farm housing facilities on dairy farms in Vermont, which often take the shape of barns or trailers (Jickling, 2021).

Quantitatively, about a third of the migrant dairy farmworkers surveyed identified housing as a "significant cause of stress" according to data provided by Dan Baker in "Vermont Migrant Dairy Farmworker Housing Brief". The 2018/19 survey results presented share that of farmworkers (n=66), the number of people per household ranged from 1 to 9, with most households having 4 people (Baker, 2021). On average, these farmworker homes had 3.7 bedrooms, with a range of 1 to 7 bedrooms. About two-thirds of the workers had a bedroom to themselves, while 23% shared a bedroom with a family member or relative. An important sign of overcrowding in some farmworker housing is that over 10% of the workers had to share a bedroom with someone who was not related to them (Baker, 2021). It is also mentionable that this problem is nuanced. Since migrant dairy farmworkers mention that a prominent stress they face is social isolation, overcrowding may offer relief in this regard, however, overcrowding in general causes many practical issues (Baker, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic is also essential to touch upon, considering that inadequate housing accommodations contributed to the spread of this illness, making housing a multifaceted problem for the migrant dairy farmworker community during this time. The overcrowding within

the provided dwellings, coupled with their inability to take paid time off of work makes for very serious health concerns (Baker, 2021).

Dairy farmers' role in farmworker housing

While it is the responsibility of the farmers providing housing accommodations to their employees to ensure safe and adequate living spaces, it is important to understand the challenges that farmers themselves face in providing adequate housing, in order to grasp the extent of the migrant dairy farmworker housing crisis. Economic constraints, legal restrictions and misunderstandings, cultural and language barriers, as well as xenophobia are all key issues playing a role in farmers' (in)ability to provide adequate housing for migrant dairy farmworkers in Vermont. While some farmers do recognize the inadequacy of the accommodations they provide, they often have limited resources themselves, making it difficult for them to make the proper changes (Baker, 2021).

The dairy farm industry in Vermont has been economically challenged for years, leaving dairy farm owners in an vulnerable and volatile situation; prolonged periods of milk prices at or below the cost of production have progressively forced farms out of business, leaving those who remain with insufficient funds to invest in things such as housing for their workers (Baker, 2021). These economic challenges contribute to dairy farmers' inability or unwillingness to fund housing improvements (Vermont Housing & Conservation Board, 2021).

The lack of legal and regulatory clarity also serves to hinder farmers' understanding of what is or is not acceptable for housing standards. Since dairy farmworkers are exempt from programs such as H-2A, the rules and regulations surrounding housing are too subjective and

also lack enforcement. There are also hindrances such as "current use" restrictions for farms that are on conserved land, which makes obtaining building permits fairly difficult, along with other building requirements that negatively impact farms' building capacity (Vermont Housing & Conservation Board, 2021). In addition, the "Farmworker Housing Needs Assessment" shares that, "...farm covenants[6], especially, the Option to Purchase at Agricultural Value (OPAV)[7] may limit the farmer's ability to get a return on their capital investment for on-farm employee housing when the ownership of the farm transfers" which in turn, decreases farmers' willingness and ability to expand or improve their on-farm housing (Vermont Housing & Conservation Board, 2021, pg. 3).

Immigration status also serves as a factor against farmers' willingness to improve housing conditions. As previously mentioned, the overwhelming majority of migrant dairy farmworkers do not have legal status, due to the myriad of legal barriers they face in being able to obtain formal permission to work. This is a key factor hindering access to federal funding, which is needed in order to bridge the gap of their housing needs. Farmers also have shared that due to the uncertainty of immigration policy, they are unable or unwilling to make long-term improvements (Vermont Housing & Conservation Board, 2021). They have also shared that migrant farmworkers' immigration status inhibits their ability and willingness to stray from the farm itself for fear of deportation, which geographically limits the areas in which their housing can be (Baker, 2021).

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[6] Farm covenants are specific agreements outlining what farms legally can or cannot do, as outlined in a contract or deed and in this case can sometimes apply to later owners of the farm (Cornell Law School, n.d.).

[7] An OPAV is a voluntary agreement that restricts land sales to specific people and sets the sale price at agricultural value. When this land gets donated or sold to a land trust or government agency, the land's value typically decreases, making it more affordable for farmers to buy (Center for Agriculture and Food Systems, n.d.).

It is also essential to mention the reality that racial stereotyping, cultural and language barriers, and xenophobia contribute to inadequate housing conditions and double standards in housing for the U.S.-born versus migrant dairy farmworkers (Vermont Housing & Conservation Board, 2021). This, combined with these aforementioned challenges, restrict farmers' ability and/or willingness to improve housing standards for the migrant dairy farmworkers that they provide housing accommodations to.

Identifying the housing needs of migrant dairy farmworkers

These housing conditions, coupled with economic strain, regulatory burden, immigration status, language barriers, low wages, land use restrictions, and cultural and legal barriers combine to create a perfect storm for unsustainable and exploitative living situations for migrant dairy farmworkers in Vermont. However, there is difficulty when assessing the needs of migrant dairy farmworkers, since need is a highly subjective term, as suggested in the "Farmworker Housing Needs Assessment." This assessment therefore offers an estimate of the needs, giving a clearer sense of scale; in order to achieve a quality standard for farmworker housing in comparison to Vermont's typical rural rental housing, the suggested improvement needs are shared in the table below, including the economic scale of these improvements, using their collected data.[8]

Table 3. Suggested improvements (based on 600 dwellings housing 2,000 workers)

Scale of improvements	**Cost**	**Percentage ; number of units**
Small scale	Less than $5,000	42% ; 150 - 200

[8] Please note that this assessment is based on all farmworker housing in Vermont.

Moderate rehabilitation	$5,000 - $50,000	21% ; 75 - 100
Substantial rehabilitation	$50,000+	21% ; 75 - 100
Creation of additional dwellings	$50,000+	15% ; 50 - 75

While this may be the assessed need for housing improvements, quick-fixes are unlikely and unattainable for most farmers. They estimate that, "If only 10% of that estimated need was addressed each year, it would require investing roughly $2 million annually and would improve the living conditions of 200 more farmworkers for each year that this money was invested", most of which would be invested by farmers (Vermont Housing & Conservation Board, 2021, pg. 5). Because of this, and the variety of other barriers that are also prevalent, it is identified that private investment is essential, and many farmers finance housing improvements as operational costs, using lenders (Vermont Housing & Conservation Board, 2021). However, there are also limited resources available for assistance and guidance through the complicated permit, design and construction process that may be necessary for the improvements to be made (Vermont Housing & Conservation Board, 2021).

To circle back, the most pressing issues for migrant dairy farmworker housing that need to be addressed are as follows:

Table 4: Key housing issues to be addressed for migrant dairy farmworkers

Barriers	**Scope of barriers**
Legal	● Legal financial barriers bar access to resources to make proper housing improvements. ● No access to federal or state funding for support. ● Regulatory burdens and land use restrictions limit farmers' ability and willingness to make proper housing improvements. ● Unclear requirements for proper, safe, and affordable housing. ● Non-regulated or enforced housing requirements. ● Loopholes and inadequate legal requirements for year-round farmworker housing dwellings.

	• Immigration status - catch 22: undocumented status negatively impacts ability to seek assistance, report issues, and live on off-farm properties for fear of deportation.
Financial	• Low wage impact ability of migrant dairy farmworkers to find affordable off-farm housing. • Farmers' economic constraints.
Cultural and language	• Housing issues are compounded by xenophobia, racial stereotyping, and cultural differences. • Language barriers leave room for miscommunications and unclear rules, regulations and support.
Physical housing issues & poor maintenance	• Mainly: safety concerns, unhygienic or unclean spaces, structural problems, overcrowding and lack of privacy, insufficient temperature control, and water quality issues.

Existing policy solutions, proposals & community innovation

Since the issue of migrant dairy farmworker housing is so apparent and vast, there are a handful of policy solutions, proposals, and community innovations that are already in play in order to improve migrant dairy farmworker housing conditions in Vermont. These efforts include Milk with Dignity, a collaborative housing design project, the Vermont Farmworker Housing Repair Loan Program (FWH) and Farmworker Replacement Housing Loan Program (FWHR), as well as the Federal Farm Workforce Modernization Act of 2021.

Milk with Dignity is a farmworker-led program developed by the Vermont based organization, Migrant Justice. This program amplifies dairy farmworkers' voices, advocating for industry-wide systemic change to promote worker's rights by encouraging and inviting dairy companies and food retailers to take accountability for the rights and welfare of dairy supply chain workers, with an emphasis on labor and housing conditions (Migrant Justice, 2025). Milk with Dignity "...enlists the resources of participating food industry leaders, who commit to source their milk in compliance with the fundamental human rights of dairy workers, to improve farm labor conditions and help offset farmers' costs of compliance by providing farmers premium prices for milk" (Migrant Justice, 2025, para. 6). The program operates on five core principles including: 1) Farmworker-authored Code of Conduct (AKA the MD Code of Conduct), 2) Farmworker education, 3) A third party monitoring body (the Milk with Dignity Standards Council)[9], 4) Economic relief, and 5) Legally-binding agreements. In summary, the participants enter an agreement with Migrant Justice, pledging that their dairy supplier farms will join the Milk with Dignity program, pay the MD premium to support fair wages and working conditions, and enforce market consequences if necessary (Migrant Justice, 2025). Within this agreement farmers must adhere to the MD Code of Conduct, ensuring safe and humane working conditions, fair wages, and fair housing (Migrant Justice, 2025). They also commit to providing workers with education on their rights through Migrant Justice, access to a protected complaint system, and the ability for the Milk with Dignity Standards Council (MDSC) to monitor compliance and investigate complaints to maintain the program's integrity (Migrant Justice, 2025). Notably, companies are not required by law to commit to this program as it is opt-in only, however once they commit it is a legally binding agreement.

[9] The Milk with Dignity Standards Council (MDSC) is a third-party non-profit. Their role involves collaborating with farmers and farmworkers to ensure the understanding of and adherence to the labor standards outlined in the MD code of Conduct (Migrant Justice, 2025).

Milk with Dignity has had a lot of success. Their program currently supports roughly 54 dairy farms in Vermont and New York, protecting over 250 farmworkers under the MD Code of Conduct. The MDSC has also proven to be proactive in responding to workers in need of support, and creating effective action plans to resolve violations and ensure compliance amongst participating farms (Migrant Justice, 2025). The program is also expanding, as they are conferring with more major dairy brands to ensure the protections of thousands of more dairy workers who are currently unprotected (Migrant Justice, 2025).

In terms of housing, Milk with Dignity has had significant impacts for migrant dairy farmworkers. This is illustrated in the "Milk with Dignity First Biennial Report: 2018-2019", where they share the story of José Luis. Before the farm that he worked on enrolled in the Milk with Dignity program, he and his co-workers faced serious housing issues; five of them shared a three bedroom trailer, their walls came with holes in them, their shower's cold water faucets were broken, they had inadequate refrigerator space, among other things (Migrant Justice, 2020). Once their farm was enrolled with Milk with Dignity, they called the Worker Support Line to address their housing concerns. In turn, MDSC went to the farm to inspect and come up with an action plan to ensure the farm's compliance with Milk with Dignity's housing standards; with a combination of the MDSC's support and the MD premium, new, safe, and clean housing was created on their farm in a timely manner (Migrant Justice, 2020). As a result, José Luis noticed a concrete change in his quality of life, stating "With the new housing everything is different, the beds are new, everything is new. Now it's possible to keep everything clean. The other one was so run-down it was impossible to keep it clean. Now we are more at ease, workers are less stressed out, people arrive after work, relax, things are organized, there is no stress about the house because everything is running so well." (Migrant Justice, 2020, pg. 40). This first-hand

account illustrates the importance of worker-driven programs such as Milk with Dignity to ensure sustainable and safe living standards and in turn improve the quality of the lives of migrant dairy farmworkers.

Additionally, there is a community-based project in the works to design and build sustainable, affordable, and energy-efficient housing solutions to improve migrant farmworkers' living conditions (Thill, 2021). This initiative is spearheaded by Migrant Justice activist and former Vermont migrant dairy farmworker José Ignacio, along with several other Migrant Justice activists who are also members of the migrant farmworker community. They work in collaboration with the local organizations New Frameworks and Efficiency Vermont (Thill, 2021).

José Ignacio and his peers acknowledge housing for Migrant Farmworkers in Vermont as being highly inadequate and unsafe. He shared that he had personally spent over a year at a farm residing in a garage which had trailers in it — he and his peers didn't even have real beds to sleep in, which is unfortunately not a unique situation (Thill, 2021). He also shared that he and his coworkers tried to advocate for better living conditions for themselves, but they were met with hesitation from their employer due to permit and financial concerns (Thill, 2021). For José Ignacio, a worker-led movement and community support is essential to make necessary systemic changes, including adequate housing *and* fair labor conditions (Thill, 2021).

Because of this need, José Ignacio and his colleagues, including New Frameworks, have been working on a practical sustainable housing solution rooted in the needs of farmworkers' whom they are gaining feedback from. New Frameworks is an innovative, Vermont-based company that uses locally sourced, natural building materials to design efficient and sustainable

homes (New Frameworks, n.d.). They are working with New Frameworks to create improved, net-zero, and ready-made farmworker housing, using their "Cabañita" project as the foundation for further design (Thill, 2021). These units will be designed to be energy-efficient and use local and naturally sourced materials, which ensures the units' are environmentally friendly, and it addresses a need since current farmworker housing units are outdated and energy-intensive, overall saving farmers money over time (Thill, 2021). They are also designing the inside of the units with farmworkers' lifestyles and needs at the forefront; the article shares that, "... more 'modules' — bedrooms, bathrooms, a kitchen — will have to be added to the central room… the loft design will likely be more practical if it's walled off as a second-floor bedroom, so workers on different shifts can sleep while others sharing the home are awake" (Thill, 2021). Along with this, Efficiency Vermont has two programs that are being used to improve farmworker housing in collaboration with Migrant Justice: a mobile home replacement program to be replaced by zero-energy modular homes (ZEM's), and an energy-efficiency program. This initiative will replace outdated and inadequate homes with sustainable units that, in collaboration with Migrant Justice, can be implemented on farms (Thill, 2021).

These initiatives are evidently beneficial to farmworkers and farmers alike. With support from Milk with Dignity and other funding sources like Efficiency Vermont's incentives and government loans, farmers' housing development costs can be reduced, matching what their current maintenance and operation costs are for existing housing units (Thill, 2021). This approach aims to ease farmers' financial and maintenance burdens while also giving farmworkers the essential improved, safe and quality housing that they deserve. Although, it is important to mention that this is not such a simple fix for many cash-strapped farmers. While it is inevitable that these ZEMs will lower costs over time, their ticket-price of $150,000 to $200,000

is an obstacle as they can find other mobile homes for much lower prices, like $60,000 (Thill, 2021). In an effort to address that and make these homes more affordable, additional funding programs may be necessary, like the USDA's Rural Development loans[10] or assistance from local lenders (Thill, 2021). Overall, this is an amazing and scalable initiative and the combination of Migrant Justice, New Frameworks, and Efficiency Vermont's efforts will be critical in the overall goal to create sustainable, safe, suitable, and affordable solutions to the current migrant farmworker housing crisis. Though, the implementation and scaling of these efforts is inevitably more nuanced, and difficult to implement fully.

The Champlain Housing Trust has also contributed to this process aiming to increase financial access to ensure that farmworker housing improvements are feasible. They created two loan programs that came to fruition in 2022 in response to the Farmworker Housing Needs Assessment published in 2021: the Vermont Farmworker Housing Repair Loan Program (FWH) and the Farmworker Replacement Housing Loan Program (FWHR) (Reed, 2024). The details of each are outlined in the tables below, as per the State of Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets website information.

Table 5: A summary of the Vermont Farmworker Housing Repair Loan Program (FWH)

Details	**The Farmworker Housing Repair Loan Program (FWH)**
Reason	To make necessary improvements to farmworker housing by ensuring affordable resources.
Loans	● Up to 30,000 at 0% interest ● Forgiven over 10 years (only if all improvements are maintained) ● Forgivable

[10] The USDA's Rural Development loans offer low interest rates for up to 33 years.

Eligibility	● Must be an active farmer. ● Have a proven need for these affordable resources to address specific housing needs for farmworker housing units. ○ Must: ■ Be under the income limit set by the USDA for federal program eligibility. ■ Have reasonable grounds for why conventional financing is unavailable or not feasible for farmworker housing to be provided by the farm. ● The enrolled housing unit must already exist as a structure owned by the farmer. ● Must be inhabited by farmworkers only. ● Must submit required supporting documentation.
Units	● Manufactured homes ● Stick-built houses ● Apartments in barns or other outbuildings
Health & safety repairs/improvements that the loan will cover (not limited to these)	● Wastewater systems ● Air sealing and insulation ● Noise mitigation measures ● Overcrowding relief ● Food prep and storage improvements ● Mold remediation ● Electrical and plumbing upgrades ● Roof replacements
Support provided through	UVM extension

Table 6: A summary of the Farmworker Replacement Housing Loan Program (FWHR)

Details	**The Farmworker Replacement Housing Loan Program (FWHR)**
Reason	To build new housing for farmworkers where replacement of existing housing is necessary.
Loan	● Up to $120,000 ● Interest and payment free until sale or transfer of

	the property. ● First $30,000 forgiving at the rate of $3,000 a year over 10 years (must remain in use as farmworker housing).
Requirements / chronological steps	● 1) Complete Farmworker Housing Replacement Interest form ● 2) Complete an FWHR loan application
Eligible Projects (Baker, 2023)	● A pre-existing structure built prior to 1976 or is past its useful duration. ● Units located in barns or other units used for housing that is a non-traditional structure used for housing. ● Pre-existing housing that is overcrowded. ● Pre-existing housing that cannot and will not comply with the rental housing code.

The Farmworker Housing Repair Loan Program (FWH) has proven to be very successful since its launch, so much so that the Champlain Valley Housing Trust increased funding and opened up applications for a second round. The initial program funds available were $500,000 from the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB) to Champlain Housing Trust (CHT); this only allowed for 15 out of 45 of the applicant's loans to be approved (Champlain Housing Trust, n.d.). Despite the fact that there was a clear need for more funding, the first round of this project was still immensely impactful. There were a total of 19 projects approved to improve housing on 15 farms, 10 of which were dairy farms, and the housing improvements benefitted about 110-135 farmworkers (Baker, 2023). The scope of the issues being addressed in this first round included fixing windows and doors, electrical and plumbing issues, insulation, roof repairs, septic systems, among other things (Baker, 2023). Because of the immense demand for the FWH, a second round of funding was launched with $774,000 provided by the VHCB, in which another 25 or so repair projects are estimated to be funded (Baker, 2023). The Farmworker Replacement Housing Loan Program (FWHR), although much less developed than the FWH

program, has still proven to be successful. The FWHR was able to fund two replacement projects aiding six farmworkers (Champlain Housing Trust, n.d.).

Overall, the need for these loan programs is clear, so much so that the case for improved farmworker housing was brought to the Vermont Statehouse in spring of 2024. The Champlain Housing Trust along with other advocates shared the successes of these pilot loan programs, and the large demand for the funding (Reed, 2024). The VHCB thus far has approved further funding to support the program until 2026, through which they estimate will improve the living conditions for about 412 farmworkers altogether (Reed, 2024). However, once that funding runs out there will inevitably be a need for more funding to ensure that all of the additional farmworkers in need of housing improvements will be achieved (Reed, 2024). Conclusively, advocates acknowledge that this important program needs to be sustained through further funding in addition to what is being supplied by the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board, along with improved communication channels to ensure the legislature will maintain the funding for the success of this project (Reed, 2024).

Recommended actions

It is essential to continue these local initiatives that are already in motion. Along with this, the "Vermont Farm Worker Wage, Hour and Housing Fact Sheet" outlines some best practices to ensure safe and viable housing for farmworkers in Vermont, in conjunction with the legal requirements of the Rental Housing Health Code. According to their list, farm owners must regularly monitor farmworker housing, ensuring proper maintenance, cleanliness, and safety is being followed, and they suggest that employees should be oriented on these inspections (Green Mountain Dairy Farmers, et al.). They also emphasize in their list that regular cleaning services

should be provided for tenants living in these spaces, that they should be properly cleaned before/after new tenants occupy their dwellings, and that laundry facilities should be available nearby (Green Mountain Dairy Farmers, et al.). They also should partake in necessary practices to ensure the health and safety of their tenants, including the assurance that housing is safely situated away from hazardous substances and manure that are likely on the farm, and employ Integrated Pest Management (Green Mountain Dairy Farmers, et al.). Furthermore, farm owners must respect their tenants' privacy and provide proper notice prior to any house-visits, and they must allow tenants to have visitors without interference (Green Mountain Dairy Farmers, et al.).

It is undeniable that there is a clear need for a multifaceted approach to housing reform in migrant dairy farmworker communities. There is no one simple solution; there are many pieces to this puzzle that must work together to fix such a complex and nuanced issue. Put simply, there is a distinct necessity for policy reform, increased funding, collective efforts and initiatives of all stakeholders, along with thorough and frequent routine inspections of farmworker housing.

In terms of policy reform, there are key areas that must be addressed to ensure better conditions for migrant dairy farmworkers both by federal and state law. As previously established, there is currently no legal way for migrant dairy farmworkers to gain legal status. This is a necessary federal decision that should be made, which would have a positive domino-effect on wages and subsequently on housing; if migrant dairy farmworkers were able to attain legal status, their citizenship would provide them with more worker's rights including minimum wage, and there would be less fear surrounding deportation, which are both large barriers contributing to this current housing crisis. One potential way that this could occur is if the federal government expands H-2A to support farmworkers who work year-round, which

currently provides temporary legal status and a variety of protections to foreign-born agricultural workers employed seasonally in the United States (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, n.d.). While the expansion of the H-2A visa program may be beneficial, it should also undergo more reform to sufficiently and equitably ensure the needs of all migrant agricultural workers in the United States. Additionally, expanding the Federal Labor Standards Act to include migrant dairy farmworkers in their protections would be extremely beneficial. However, it is important to mention that, especially as a result of Donald Trump's return to office as of January 20, 2025, the likelihood of advancing federal initiatives aimed at easing the path to legal status, enacting meaningful immigration reform, or securing funding to improve farmworker housing conditions has significantly diminished. Given the administration's well-documented anti-immigrant stance, current cuts to federal aid and the escalation of deportation efforts are already having a detrimental impact and will likely continue to hinder progress in addressing housing and essential service needs within the migrant community.

In light of these challenges, state-level initiatives focused on housing and labor protections, though limited in scope, are essential in the absence of comprehensive federal immigration reform. A more realistic approach, therefore, involves expanding state legislation and support systems to implement practical, effective solutions to the ongoing housing crisis. As noted earlier, there are state laws in place in Vermont to protect all renters, however the issue mainly lies in their enforcement. The current complaint-based enforcement methodology is unclear, inaccessible and overall inadequate especially for migrant dairy farmworkers (Reed, 2022). To fix this issue, it would be reasonable for the state to enact and enforce a strict and thorough routine inspection of housing conditions to ensure that state regulations are being followed, perhaps even collaborating with the MDSC to do so. Additionally, the state could also

create concrete laws specifically for migrant dairy farmworker housing to provide more clarity and specific requirements for their housing conditions and unique circumstances. It was also mentioned previously that regulatory burdens and land use restrictions limit farmers' ability and willingness to make proper housing improvements, so providing a simpler path for farmers to navigate this and/or reforming these policies to relieve these limitations could also be beneficial. Along with this, it is evident that the state needs to provide more funding to support restorative housing projects on farms, which can and should be ascertained through a variety of ways.

Collective efforts and initiatives of all stakeholders are also needed to ensure that housing is safe, adequate, and a sustainable environment for migrant dairy farmworkers to thrive. Evidently, organizations such as Migrant Justice, The Champlain Housing Trust, New Frameworks, Efficiency Vermont, and more have been immensely helpful in carrying out efforts to improve farmworker housing. Providing more support and funding for organizations such as these, promoting dialogue and collaboration, and encouraging creative solutions are all huge components to ensuring that this systemic issue gets properly addressed (Vermont Housing & Conservation Board, 2021). It is also important that migrant dairy farmworkers themselves are thoroughly involved in these efforts, as they, of course, know best what their wants and needs are, which is why efforts such as Milk with Dignity through Migrant Justice are critical.

Conclusion

In Vermont, migrant dairy farmworkers are crucial to the agricultural and subsequent economic success in the state. However, despite their economic role, they are often overlooked when it comes to their rights and well-being. They are not just workers, they are human-beings

who deserve safe, dignified and supportive living conditions so they can thrive both personally and professionally.

This research has highlighted the critical issue of inadequate housing for migrant dairy farmworkers in Vermont. Housing is often provided by employers as an on-farm benefit, and housing conditions are far too often unsafe and undignified. This issue is a reflection of the deeper systemic issues within the agricultural sector, shaped by economic pressures, immigration policy, and insufficient worker protections, especially for migrant dairy farmworkers.

The findings of this research paper prove that the current state of migrant dairy farmworker housing, provided mainly as an on-farm benefit by employers, is inadequate and requires coordinated action to be improved. Addressing this issue is both a moral obligation, and necessary for the long-term sustainability of the dairy industry in Vermont. By collaborating on a clear, actionable plan, securing funding, and fostering a commitment to sustainable housing initiatives, the living conditions of farmworkers can and must be improved.

It is essential to enact comprehensive housing reform in order to improve living conditions for migrant dairy farmworkers in Vermont. Such reform should include coordinated efforts among policymakers, employers, community organizations, and the migrant farmworkers themselves in order to develop adequate, sustainable, and affordable housing solutions. By securing funding, creating and implementing collaborative and actionable plans, and committing to such initiatives, Vermont has the tools to make a meaningful impact on its migrant dairy farmworkers.

Data limitations & considerations

This paper draws on a variety of both quantitative and qualitative data collected from multiple sources to explore the demographics of migrant dairy farmworkers in Vermont and their housing conditions. However, several limitations and considerations must be acknowledged regarding the accuracy and completeness of this data.

A key limitation of this data is the potential for inaccuracy and/or bias in the representation of immigrant populations, particularly in relation to legal status. Given the sensitive nature of immigration status, there may be both underrepresentation and overrepresentation of certain groups within the dataset depending on the source. This could arise due to individuals' reluctance to disclose their legal status or due to challenges in accurately capturing such data through traditional reporting mechanisms.

In summary, while the data available and utilized in this research provides very valuable insights and allows us to visualize the migrant dairy farmworker housing crisis, it is important to consider these potential biases and limitations when interpreting the results.

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