



NORTHWEST **WORKERS' JUSTICE** PROJECT

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Testimony in Support of HB 5005
Northwest Workers' Justice Project
Corinna Spencer-Scheurich, Director
February 13, 2025

Dear Co-Chairs Broadman and Evans, and members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Public Safety:

I am writing to support HB 5005 with the -1 amendments that will keep funding law enforcement and community organizations' efforts to address the grave effects of Oregon's illegal marijuana industry on low-wage and immigrant workers. In 2022, Northwest Workers' Justice Project began to receive funds from CJC's Illegal Marijuana Market Enforcement Grant through a partnership of nonprofit organizations. The statewide partnership, called the Cannabis Workers Resilience Partnership (CWRP), is an innovative and holistic response to the humanitarian crisis in the illegal cannabis industry.

CWRP is a collaboration of seven community-based organizations, mental health providers, and legal services organizations. CWRP provides financial assistance, education and outreach, mental health counseling, and legal advice and representation to workers across the state.

In the last two and half years, we have provided direct services to more than 700 low-wage, immigrant workers, who have primarily been recruited from farmworker communities in Oregon. Workers are usually recruited to plant, harvest or process illegal marijuana with the promise of legal marijuana or hemp employment. We have learned of truly shocking working conditions on illegal marijuana farms in Oregon. Many workers are not allowed to leave the grow site until the work is done. Or, they are only allowed to leave the worksite for supplies if family members stay behind to ensure their return. Workers' documents are sometimes taken by the employer. Worksites are patrolled by armed supervisors. Workers have reported threats of violence. Workers are coerced into working to the end of the season by promises of payments that never come. Employers use the illegal nature of the operation to threaten workers who want to leave or complain with immigration or law enforcement actions. And, workers report rampant wage theft. We have had cases where workers are left at the worksite with a promise that the boss will be back to pay them, only to disappear completely, without paying the workers.

The living conditions on illegal marijuana farms often amount to a humanitarian crisis. Workers have been denied basic housing, sleeping in makeshift tents made out of tarps or scraps of wood or out in the open in the fields. Workers have been denied food and have no way to leave the property to get their own food since they are locked in. Workers report living without bathrooms, electricity, or potable water, causing unsanitary conditions and destructive environmental impacts.

We have worked with CJC to design and fund a truly exceptional service model. Community organizations—Unete in Medford and Centro de Servicios para Campesinos in Woodburn—act as humanitarian first responders. Unete, for example, has been called to law enforcement raids to pick up affected workers. Through the grant, Unete has provided emergency shelter, food and transportation for workers who have little to nothing after weeks or months of unpaid work. Other workers, many fearing for their lives and for those of their families, have sought out the Partnership for support and return home. Unete and Centro support affected workers to address the immediate impacts on their lives with the goal of helping them transition to work in other industries.

The workers also are connected with culturally specific mental health resources from Raices de Bienestar, another Partnership organization. Many of the workers we have spoken with have been trafficked, forced to work in grueling conditions without sufficient food or access to bathrooms, and abandoned without pay or a way to return to their communities. Trauma-informed counseling provides a path to resilience and recovery for abused workers and nearly 100 workers have received services.

Finally, all of the workers are connected to one of three Partnership legal organizations, Northwest Workers' Justice Project and the Farmworker Programs of Legal Aid Services of Oregon and Oregon Law Center. Attorneys have been helping workers navigate legal resources, including employment-based lawsuits, administrative agency complaints, and immigration support. The legal services are designed to find remedies for workers and to hold unscrupulous employers accountable whenever possible and safe to do so. The work of our organizations has helped recover over \$300,000 in unpaid wages and damages so far, with many cases still in process.

The Partnership organizations also have been meeting with Oregon's state agencies – Bureau of Labor and Industries, Oregon Occupations Health and Safety Administration, Department of Agriculture and Oregon Liquor and Cannabis Commission – to try share trends and look for regulatory and enforcement solutions to the problems that workers face.

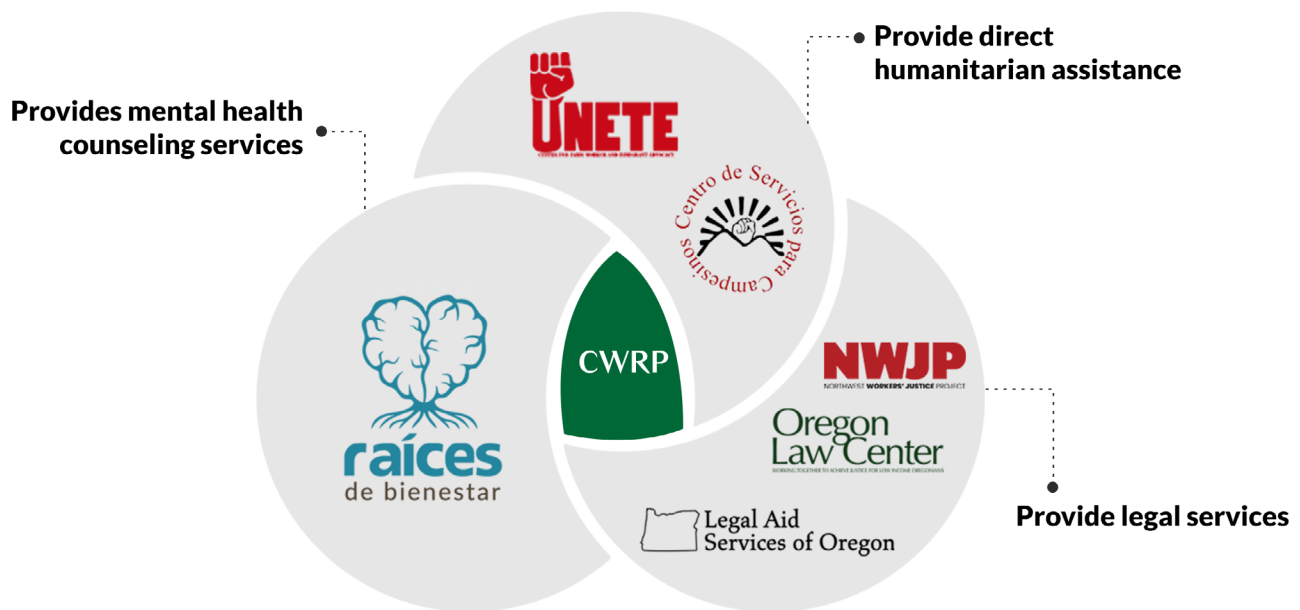
We also launched an outreach program designed to educate Oregon's traditional farmworker communities about the dangers we are seeing in the cannabis industry and ways that they can protect themselves. Entire communities are impacted by the fear and economic instability that the flourishing illegal marijuana industry creates. Through education and outreach, we are working to prevent exploitation and protect our client communities. We have distributed over 15,000 information materials and have ongoing radio ads that provide education on the industry.

CJC has been a pragmatic and collaborative funder of our work. While initially a law enforcement grant fund, CJC has worked closely with the Partnership to pivot to including community grant funds directed at workers affected by the illegal cannabis crisis. On behalf of the Partnership, I urge to you support HB 5005 with the -1 amendments and continue funding for the important work of CJC and the Illegal Marijuana Market Enforcement Grant Program.

CANNABIS WORKER RESILIENCE PARTNERSHIP



The Cannabis Worker Resilience Partnership (CWRP) is a collaboration of seven community-based organizations, mental health providers, and legal services organizations working to support individuals impacted by the humanitarian crisis created by the illegal marijuana industry in Oregon. CWRP provides financial assistance, education and outreach, mental health counseling, and legal advice and representation to workers across the state.



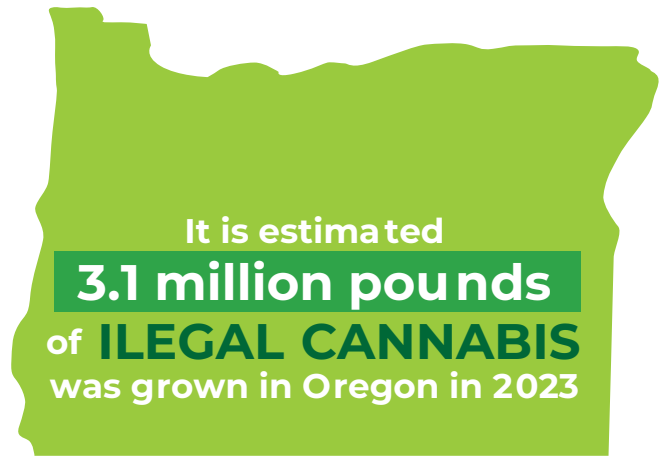
Contact The Cannabis Worker Resilience Partnership:

Direct for workers: 503-902-1262
For all other requests: 503-525-8454

About the problem:

Immigrant farmworkers are increasingly being recruited, often unknowingly, to work in the illegal marijuana industry. They report many serious abuses, including forced labor, threats and violence, unpaid wages, and alarmingly unsafe housing conditions. Workers continue to work even under these difficult conditions because they fear the consequences of leaving, due to the coercive strategies used by their employers, as well as the potential legal and immigration consequences of having worked in the industry.

They do not know where to get help or who to trust. While these problems are most severe in purely illegal operations, abuses are occurring system-wide as many employers are abusing the state's licensing systems or contracting with unlicensed labor contractors who are unprepared to ensure compliance with the law.



This is 3 times the amount of marijuana legally grown to sell in the state¹

1. Sophie Peel and Lucas Manfield, [Willamete Week News](#)

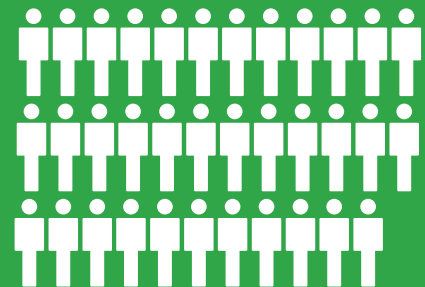
“
Many of the [CWRP] clients appear to have been experiencing symptoms related to undergoing a traumatic experience. Many of the clients' symptoms seem to be exacerbated by current stressors such as unstable housing, inconsistent employment, being far away from family, and financial difficulties.”

CWRP Mental Health Clinician

“
The program was a source of hope during my darkest times. It not only provided me with the financial assistance to keep a roof over our heads and food on the table so my children could be healthy and safe, but also gave me the emotional support to overcome my depression, process everything that happened, and move forward. It has truly been life-saving.”

CWRP Client

There have been 35 verified deaths of cannabis workers in Southern Oregon and California tied to the industry between 2016-2021, all associated with substandard living and working conditions or violence. ² A strong response is necessary to mitigate the harm done to these workers and communities and begin to hold the industry accountable.



2. Paige St. John and Marisa Gerber, [Los Angeles Times](#)

Who we are:

- Legal Partners

CWRP attorneys and paralegals support impacted workers with wage disputes, human rights abuses, and immigration concerns, and engage in policy advocacy to improve the state agency response to this crisis. **Oregon Law Center**, **Legal Aid Services of Oregon**, and **Northwest Workers' Justice Project** are the most experienced statewide providers of legal services to farmworkers in Oregon, with a history of collaboration with community partners.

- Mental Health Partner

Many of the workers have been victims of human rights abuses and other intense stressors that impact their mental health and wellbeing. CWRP provides culturally-aligned care and support through **Raíces de Bienestar**, a culturally affirming mental health non-profit focused on improving and reclaiming the emotional wellbeing of the Latine community across the state of Oregon.

- Social Service & Advocacy Partners

The CWRP community organizations provide direct humanitarian assistance in the form of emergency support and other financial assistance, as well as needed outreach, education, and resource and systems navigation. **Centro de Servicios para Campesinos** and **NOWIA Unete** are trusted by and culturally and linguistically matched with Oregon's farmworker community.

Willamette Valley Law Project, which provides additional support as the CWRP fiscal agent, has a long history of supporting and coordinating Latine community organizations in Woodburn and the surrounding area.

Impact to date:

In two years since the partnership was formed, the seven partners have accomplished the following:

+700

Workers served directly with legal consultation and humanitarian services.

+850

Individuals engaged through outreach on the program and Distributed copies of educational materials on cannabis workers rights to community members.

+85

Mental health services provided.

+40

Cases have been filed in state and federal court and the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries against employers on behalf of more than 50 workers.

+\$300K

Recovered for workers, through settlements or court decisions from resolved cases.

+\$200K

Distributed in humanitarian funds.

+15K

Distributed copies of educational materials on cannabis workers rights to community members.

Developed a geographic map of where reported grows occur so we can direct our outreach services accordingly.



The Work Ahead:

The partnership's objective is not only to support workers, but also to develop solutions to the systemic issues that perpetuate these abuses. It has become clear during our project that our existing resources in the state are insufficient and ineffective given the magnitude of the crisis.

We need to take action to increase or improve:

- State agency coordination
- Monitoring and inspections of license holders
- The options for holding property owners accountable in a legal process
- The statewide anti-labor trafficking response to provide wrap-around services and improve law enforcement training

By the end of 2025, we strive to:

- Support over 1000 workers with direct humanitarian assistance and mental health services
- Provide legal advice or representation to 500 workers
- Pursue legal action against 50 non-compliant cannabis employers
- Provide rights education to 1500 workers



“ Workers report living in crowded, unsanitary, substandard housing, and working seventy or more hours per week. Employers keep promising them they will be paid at a later date and often isolate or threaten them. Workers often feel they have no choice but to keep working. ”

CWRP Attorney

The CWRP has just begun to scratch the surface on responding to the human impact of this devastating industry.

Much of these past two years have been poured into creating a wrap-around infrastructure to support workers that includes legal, humanitarian and mental health services. We must continue this partnership to reach even more workers, offer continuity of services, coordinate and collaborate with law enforcement and other involved government agencies, all the while centering on the workers' experience.