



Natives of One Wind Indigenous Alliance

Unete, Center for Farm Worker Advocacy

Red Earth Descendants

February 13, 2025

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

My name is Kathy Keesee, and I serve as the Program Coordinator for Unete, Center for Farm Worker Advocacy, based in Medford. For nearly three decades, we have been serving the farm worker and Latino immigrant communities in Jackson County.

I would like to express my support for Bill 5005 and the associated Dash-1 Amendments, which are vital for the sustained financing of the Illegal Marijuana Market Enforcement Grant Program (IMMEGP).

Before this funding was available, we contacted Representative Pam Marsh to share the accounts we received from individuals in the illegal marijuana industry. She demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of the challenging living and working conditions faced by these workers, as well as the associated dangers. Her advocacy was instrumental in incorporating community-based organizations, such as Unete, into the funding provided by the Community Justice Commission, for which we express our sincere gratitude.

Since the legalization of recreational marijuana in Oregon, there has been a significant rise in instances of worker exploitation, wage theft, and labor trafficking within our county. Reports indicate that workers have observed severe crimes, including murder and sexual assault, as well as cases where a pregnant woman, at 38 weeks of gestation, was denied necessary prenatal care, people threatened by firearms, and what I would consider modern day slavery.

We receive calls almost daily, from workers. Some opt to file wage claims, while others seek assistance for basic necessities such as food or transportation. However, a significant number of the callers, remain hesitant to take action due to fear. Many are indebted to their employers, which compels them to endure hazardous working conditions. They express genuine concern that leaving their current employment could jeopardize the safety of their families in Mexico. Although a considerable number of these workers are associated with illegal operations, we are seeing a growing trend of legal growers who are also infringing upon wage and hour regulations and failing to report workplace injuries. Without appropriate enforcement through government agencies these trends will only worsen.

We maintain a strong collaborative relationship with Sheriff Sickler and the IMET team from Jackson County, as well as the JMET team from Josephine County. Our joint efforts have included transporting workers after raids, whom we subsequently bring to our office to

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provide emergency housing, support with wage claims, and essential resources such as food and clothing.

One of our most significant achievements in partnering with law enforcement has been the establishment of mutual trust. Initially, workers may be reluctant to share information due to a lack of trust. However, as they recognize our commitment to safeguarding their information and its potential to aid future investigations, they become increasingly open to communication. This collaboration has resulted in the sharing of critical information with law enforcement, leading to additional charges and arrests.

Incorporating Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) into the funding for the Criminal Justice Commission (CJC) enables us to provide essential immediate support and the financial resources required to ensure the safety of workers. Failure to include CBO's will result in workers being more isolated and pushed further back into the shadows.

Thank you.

Kathy Keesee
Program Coordinator
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