

Good Morning Vice Chair Linthicum and committee members;

My name is Kathy Keesee and I am the program Coordinator for NOWIA Unete, Center for Farm Worker Advocacy located in Medford. We have been serving the farm worker and Latino immigrant communities since 1996. I am here to ask for your support for SB611.

The average ag workers in our community plan ahead for the leaner months when there is no available employment in our valley, usually November through February. However that changed this past year. The farm workers in our valley have experienced a marked decrease in available employment opportunities. The Tree Top plant which employed around 90 people closed its doors in 2023. They produced concentrated purees and formulated fruit sauces that were used for conventional juices, organics and baby food. This had a ripple effect in our community. Due to the decreased sales of pears from this closure, the pear harvest was also impacted. A large amount of pears were left on the trees to rot again decreasing employment opportunities for our local workers. In 2024 the packing houses that would usually close in February closed at the beginning of November which left families scrambling for work. The increased mechanization in the grape industry and reduced wine and wine grape sales, led to a shortened season for the wine grape harvest this year. The growers brought in machines to pick and prune the grapes, again, leaving workers without employment.

Ag workers in our valley are reaching retirement age, but many are still without legal status so they continue to work. One female ag worker, after waiting for 28 years, was finally granted residency. There are many that are still waiting. They have been working to support the Oregon agricultural industry but are unable to access SNAP benefits. Many have chronic health issues like hypertension and diabetes and cannot afford to purchase healthy foods for themselves and their families.

We have seen a marked increase in people at our food pantry due to this shortage of employment. At our food pantry alone we gave out food to over 1600 individuals for the last quarter of 2024 and at our mobile pantry in conjunction with our CAA ACCESS we served an additional 1700. Almost 80% say that they experience frequent food insecurity and food does not last for the entire month.

We need your help to pass this important legislation. We need your support to make sure that children have food in their bellies when they go to school to learn and that our seniors can afford to purchase healthy foods for themselves and their families.

We urge you to pass SB611.

