

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

My name is Kathy Keese, and I serve as the Program Coordinator for Unete, Center for Farm Worker Advocacy, based in Medford. For nearly three decades, we have been dedicated to supporting 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 stories 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 Criminal 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. In the last quarter of 2024 Unete helped 66 workers with humanitarian aid including emergency shelter, travel and food. However, there were at least another 60 that declined any services due to fear of retaliation. Reports from workers indicate that workers have observed severe crimes, including murder and sexual assault, human and labor trafficking, lack of access to bathing and toilet facilities, extreme code violations etc. There was one case of a pregnant woman, at 38 weeks of gestation, who was denied necessary prenatal care. Workers are threatened by firearms, and live in conditions that I would consider modern day slavery. Workers are not free to leave the grow sites.

Recently we are seeing trimming happening offsite, in residential areas or in small, enclosed areas making it harder for law enforcement to find them. Since the employers have all of the information about the employees, names, etc the workers are reluctant to file claims against them, fearing for their own lives or that of their families.

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

We receive many calls from workers, with some opting to file wage claims, while others seek assistance for basic necessities such as food or transportation. However, a significant

portion, 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. When workers are employed in trimming, the employers have all of the information about the employees, names, etc so the workers are reluctant to file claims against them again fearing for their own lives or that of their families. Although a considerable number of these workers are associated with illegal operations, we are seeing a growing trend of legal growers who are withholding pay and failing to report workplace injuries. Enforcement agencies are issuing marijuana handler cards to growers without even verifying that the person named on the permit is an actual person. Legal growers are taking advantage of this. Without appropriate enforcement through government agencies these trends will only worsen.

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 in law enforcement. However, as they recognize our commitment to safeguarding their information and its potential to aid future investigations, they become increasingly open to share information. 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 into the shadows.

Thank you.

Kathy Keesee
Program Coordinator