

Testimony of Norma Flores López
Committee Chair, Child Labor Coalition
Before the Workforce Protections Subcommittee
September 7, 2022

Chair Alma S. Adams and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the issue of U.S. child labor in agriculture and the lack of basic protections for child farmworkers.

I am joining you from the Rio Grande Valley in Texas, home to thousands of farmworkers who migrate all across the country to harvest the fruits and vegetables American families enjoy every day. Each year, my family packed all of our belongings into a pickup truck and headed “up North” to Indiana, Michigan, Colorado and Iowa to work in corn and asparagus fields, apple orchards and packing houses. Unknown dangers loomed over our two-day journey, including tire blowouts, bad weather and tragic car accidents. Our long road trip ended at dilapidated and crowded housing in isolated rural communities with the promise of back-breaking work ahead.

This way of life was my parents’ inheritance from their parents, and they, in turn, passed it down to me and my four sisters: a life of survival and hard work, of low wages, a lack of protections, and unfulfilled promise. My father and mother, both U.S.-born children, were pulled out of school at a very young age and tasked with helping their desperately poor families by working on American farms. Together, they have over 100 years of experience in the agricultural industry with no economic security or retirement to show for their decades of toiling in the fields.

I was destined to be trapped in the same generational cycle of poverty as my parents and grandparents. By the age of nine, I worked in apple orchards alongside my parents under the piece rate system that encourages as many hands as possible to harvest while hiding child labor violations and wage theft. At age 12, I was then legally permitted to work unlimited hours outside of school. This meant 10-to-12-hour days, seven days a week, at times working four weeks straight with no days off during peak harvest. I was expected to keep up with adults and often pushed myself beyond my limits while performing dangerous and back-breaking work with sharp tools in 100-degree weather. Necessities, such as bathrooms and clean drinking water were not always guaranteed, and neither was safety training or equipment.

These were the everyday dangers considered to be inherent to the industry. My parents tried to keep me safe, but I learned quickly that this was not within their control. For our family to stay employed and housed, we needed everyone to perform the type of work, the number of hours, and the locations that were set by the labor contractors at all times. We were subjected to sexual harrasment, verbal abuse and made to work under dangerous conditions with no recourse. We were reminded daily that we were disposable and how our dismissal would be of no consequence to the farm operations – to believe that we needed them more than they needed us. It was our desperate poverty and their total control over us, bolstered with the lack of oversight, factors still commonplace today, that make exploitation in agriculture prevalent. It is why you have those same people in power fighting to keep this system in place today.

Even though I have not worked in the fields in 20 years, I still live with the fear of the long-term health consequences, such as cancer, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease that are linked to the billions of pounds of chemicals that are used on farms every year.

The work I did under those conditions was not “good for me” or vocational training. Instead of teaching me valuable life lessons to help me succeed, it attacked my health and created barriers to my education. As a migrant, I attended two or even three schools in different states each school year. The disruptions had me constantly playing catch-up and kept me from participating in extracurricular activities. I struggled to keep my grades up, at times getting failed in a course on my first day of class. My parents, who only had an elementary school education and spoke no English, did not have the ability to help me, and resources were not always available. Through tremendous sacrifice from my family, I graduated high school and eventually earned my master's degree. However, the majority of farmworker youth do not even graduate high school; they drop out at a rate of four times the national average.

I am not alone. These are the same harrowing experiences I heard from my parents and grandparents, and also heard from other farmworker youth I have met throughout my career. It is the experience of approximately 300,000 farmworker children today – each of them a life, a person, a part of our community. What would be even more heartbreaking is if Congress chooses to do nothing, it will be the same experiences you will hear from children 20 years from now.

The data clearly shows that the agricultural exemption to the U.S. child labor laws is to the detriment of child farmworkers, of which the majority are U.S. citizens. H.R. 7345, the Children's Act for Responsible Employment and Farm Safety of 2022 (or the CARE Act), sponsored by Representative Lucille Roybal-Allard and co-sponsored by many members of this committee, will give children working in agriculture the same workplace protections that every other working child is provided. The bill would protect 12-year-olds from exploitation and raise the basic minimum age for agricultural work to 14. It would ensure that every 14- and 15-year-old child can do work that will not require them to put their education, health or even their life at risk.