

Testimony Before The United States Senate

**By Barbara Mainster, Executive Director
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Thank you for the opportunity to be here today. My name is Barbara Mainster. I am the executive director of the Redlands Christian Migrant Association, a non-profit, non-sectarian group serving farmworker children and their families in Florida since 1965. At the current time we provide high quality child care services to over 5,000 young children in 21 Florida Counties using multiple funding sources including Migrant Head Start, Child Development Block Grant Funds, Head Start, State Pre-K, Migrant Education.

What's important about our organization is that we realized early on that the family values of the farmworker families were so strong that we needed to staff our centers using people from the same cultures that we serve. I have with me today an example of that successful practice in our organization, Ms. Lourdes Villanueva, an area coordinator. You will hear from her next. Farmworker families value their children above all else and want what is best for them. More than half of our programs are NAEYC accredited and provide excellent school readiness.

We have been able to accomplish something unique in Florida, with the support of agriculture which helped our state decision makers realize that the farmworkers were the base of Florida's economy. Tourism may be # 1, but agriculture is # 2. As a result, RCMA has had a statewide contract for child care dollars that enables us to open centers when the families need the services, and close them down when the work ends and families move. We also have been able to move the money and services around the state depending on crops and the needs of the people. I believe this is unique to Florida, but it should be happening in Texas, California and other states where there are large numbers of farmworker families.

It has been our experience that children are not in the fields if there is another place for them to be. This issue is much more complex than people want to admit. The children whose families do farmwork are usually minorities, in our state mostly Mexican or Mexican-American. They frequently do not feel wanted in our public schools. Therefore, we have the problem of children raised with strong family values that everyone helps the family, coupled with children, at the same time, who frequently would rather not be in school. To illustrate, several years ago in one of our centers I came in and saw a staff person had her six year old child with her. She quickly explained that she was sorry she had to bring him with her, but he refused to go to Kindergarten that morning. He cried and cried and when she asked why he told her today was the day they had to get up in front of the class and count from 1 to 20. She stated he was really shy and embarrassed and that was a hard thing for him to do. The whole time she was telling me this, the child was standing there with his head down looking at his feet. She said, "You know what he really wanted to do? He didn't want to come with me, he wanted to go to work with his dad!" Now at this point the child started to look up and smile. She said, "His dad is working in the strawberries today, and you know, Jesus is really good. He's a big helper." Now by this time Jesus is not only looking at me, he's smiling at me, he's standing up

straight and tall. I don't think you have to be a child psychiatrist to know that if you have been raised to think it's good to help your family, and if you are in a situation in school where you feel uncomfortable and unwanted, and if in the fields your dad gets a little extra help from you and makes you feel good about it, then you're going to find some children in the fields.

In the twenty-six years that I've been working with RCMA in Florida, I have seen real improvements in services for farmworkers in the areas of child care, housing, and health. We have agricultural growers who are wonderful and some who are SOBs, no different than in any other profession or industry. The agricultural industry has taken a bum rap for being the guys wearing the black hats who want to enslave children to work in their fields. That's a very unfair picture. It is much easier to locate children working in an open field than it is in an urban sweatshop.

I don't know if your committee makes decisions on funding Migrant Head Start, Head Start and other child care programs, but I hope so. Funding for these programs not only keeps children from the fields, it also helps children prepare for success in school, allows employers to have a better work force and helps the economy. In April we had 2,223 children on our child care waiting list.

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