**Tips for Managing Farm-Provided Worker Housing**

**Introduction**

Housing is a valuable benefit offered by many farm managers to farm workers in order to provide a safe, comfortable, and convenient place for workers (and sometimes their families) to rest, eat, relax, and meet their living needs. Managers and workers have at least two shared housing goals:

1. Provide safe, healthy, and comfortable housing for workers.
2. Maintain housing in a good state of repair for the health and enjoyment of current and future occupants.

Managers have the added goal to:

3. Minimize property damage in order to decrease operational costs and maintain the value of the housing investment.

To achieve all these goals, farm managers need to do three things:

1. Train farm workers about using, cleaning, and maintaining the housing.
2. Set clear expectations about housing responsibilities, and follow up with routine inspections to be sure they are met.
3. Establish a culture that reinforces every day that both workers and management are responsible to keep housing in good condition for the benefit of everyone.

**Establish a Good Housing Culture**

When a farm provides housing to a worker, the farm is legally and ethically required to ensure the housing is habitable. Habitable means that the premises, and connected areas used with it, are livable, safe, and sanitary. The key to maintaining “habitable” housing is to develop a good housing “culture” among managers and workers.

Culture is essentially a group of people's understanding of “how things are done around here.” Management must communicate, with words and actions, that housing is cared for, kept clean, and repaired promptly.

If management trains workers to care for housing, creates a safe way for workers to report problems and ask questions, follows up with inspections, and makes repairs as quickly as possible, then a good housing culture will be established. If management fails to communicate expectations, ignores problems, or neglects their maintenance duties, then a poor housing culture will result.
Document Your Housing Practices

In New York, farm employers must provide a written “work agreement” for every farm employee. The New York State Department of Labor (NYSDOL) provides guidance, a blank form, and sample forms to use for this work agreement. Item 6 of the work agreement form addresses housing arrangements. Be sure to fill this section out to document the housing and transportation benefits you will provide for your employees. See the sample forms for examples of what to include in Item 6.

Use a Written Housing Agreement

When farms provide housing, an agreement exists whether it is implied and verbal or formal and written. It’s best to establish and communicate a clear, written agreement that supports a good housing culture. Elements of a written housing agreement should include:

1. A brief description of the housing and for whom it is provided.
2. Expectations about how the housing should be maintained by the occupant.
3. A list of the housing rules in an appropriate language and any specific consequences for breaking the rules. (For example, a rule stating that fighting or threatening other occupants may be cause for termination and removal from the housing.)
4. A statement indicating that management will inspect the housing on a regular basis using either an established schedule or proper notification of occupants.

It’s a good practice to consult legal counsel to review your agreement.

Orient Workers to Housing

Farm workers coming to the U.S. may be unfamiliar with facilities, appliances, and systems commonly found here. For example, U.S. cooking, plumbing, and heating systems may be completely unfamiliar for a person raised in rural Mexico or other places with vastly different culture and climate. Your orientation training for new workers, and their families, should cover how to properly use these systems. Don’t assume that your workers know how to use the systems, after all, how lost would you be if suddenly transported to another country and culture where everything was different. See the “Housing Orientation Guide” to help design your orientation program.

Provide Cleaning Supplies and Instructions

If workers don’t know how to use the systems in your housing, they probably don’t know how to clean them. Provide workers with cleaning tools (buckets, mops, sponges, wash cloths, etc.) and supplies (bathroom and kitchen cleaning chemicals, floor products, etc.). Show them how and when to use these products to clean the housing regularly.
Establish Housing Expectations and Rules

Communicating your expectations is the first and most important step to getting the results you want. When workers know, right away, that their manager expects the housing to be kept clean and damage avoided, it’s much more likely to happen.

Post the rules in English, Spanish, or other languages in a prominent place in the housing. Reinforce these rules with workers during orientation. For low literacy workers, read the rules out loud in the language they speak.

Example Housing Rules

1. Respect the other people who live in the housing, treat others as you want to be treated by them.
2. Take care of the housing, inside and out, keep it clean and avoid causing damages. It is provided for your comfort and safety and for others who will live there in the future.
3. This housing will be inspected every ____________ by ________, who can be reached at ____________.
4. Housing assignments are made only by the owner and employees may occupy only the housing to which they are assigned.
5. Report any problems with the housing right away, the owners want to fix problems quickly before they get worse.
6. No cooking is permitted in any rooms except the kitchen.
7. Occupants are forbidden to tamper with smoke or carbon monoxide alarms in any way. Report any issues to management.
8. Occupants may not remove furniture or equipment from the housing premises without specific permission from management.
9. Smoking is forbidden inside the housing. Smoking is allowed outside in designated areas.

Inspect Housing Frequently

Set an expectation with employees that a manager will inspect the housing on a regular basis. For migrant or seasonal workers, weekly inspections are best; for permanent workers, a lower frequency such as monthly may be appropriate. Assign responsibility for inspections to a manager with authority to complete. Use a recurring date such as every Wednesday or the first Friday of every month, so that workers can prepare and not be surprised by the inspection.

Use a checklist to document the condition and cleanliness of important places in the housing. Take a picture of conditions that do not meet standards and must be cleaned up. Take note of any needed repairs and make plans to complete them on a timely basis. Tell workers when the repairs will happen.
Provide a Maintenance Request Procedure

Communicate that you want to provide a safe and comfortable living space for your workers, and that can only happen if workers let management know about needed repairs. Designate a person who will be responsible for managing repair of the housing facilities, keeping records, and following up to be sure repairs were completed. Train employees either to communicate with the repair manager directly or to report needed repairs to their supervisor who will then inform the right person.

Journal System

Create a standard system such as a notebook and a whiteboard to communicate with workers about repairs, progress, and when they should be completed. Keep the notebook for a permanent record and put the whiteboard where everyone can communicate about progress. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Repair Needed</th>
<th>Manager Name, Date Checked, Note</th>
<th>Date Repair Expected</th>
<th>Date Repair Completed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stove burner not working</td>
<td>Bob, 2/5/2018, burner just loose, cleaned and fixed.</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>2/5/2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bedroom window broken</td>
<td>Bob, 3/1/2018, One pane broken, covered temporarily with plastic</td>
<td>3/14/18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Cornell Farmworker Program has an English/Spanish checklist that can be used in worker housing to create this journal system.

Ticket System

Another communication system is to create a help “ticket” on a standard, bilingual form that workers use to report problems, perhaps on colored paper. Train workers to fill out the “blue ticket” whenever they want to report a needed repair or to request information or help with something. Provide a box or other location where workers can easily place their ticket; assign someone to monitor the box daily for tickets. Track the ticket until the question or problem is resolved, then retain it for your records.

Whatever system you use, it's important to communicate with workers about when repairs will happen, this sends a message that you care about meeting their needs and will take action. Follow up on repairs and be sure they are completed in a timely manner, when management neglects repairs it can lead to poor attitudes and abuse of housing by workers.

Document Housing Conditions

Complete housing inspections regularly while workers are in the housing, at the time workers move out, and before new workers move into the housing. Use a housing inspection checklist and take photographs to further document the condition of the housing. Retain this information on file, it could be helpful when settling any disputes with...
housing occupants or responding to any regulatory authorities who may have questions about the housing.

**Incent for Good Housing Behaviors**
Many worker behaviors can be influenced by financial incentives, including the maintenance of a housing facility. Under New York labor law, farm employers may take only a nominal allowance for the cost of housing, and no security deposit, so there’s no financial way to recover the cost of damages to housing. It is possible, however, to encourage good behaviors with incentives.

Consider offering a financial, or other bonus, for workers who keep their housing units clean and in good repair. This bonus must be over and above minimum wage requirements and any wages that were included in the work agreement. For example, a vegetable farmer could pay a cash bonus at the end of the season to those workers who kept their housing clean and in good condition. A dairy farmer could provide a cash incentive, or pizza and ice cream, to all those workers who kept their housing up to standards each month. In any case, a consistent monitoring and scoring checklist and reporting system between management and workers is necessary to keep such a program fair and understandable by workers.

**Focus on Safety**
Be sure that a fire extinguisher is located in the kitchen or close to any other cooking facilities. Provide smoke and carbon monoxide alarms. Train workers to understand and use this important safety equipment.

**Water and Septic**
Farm worker housing should use public water supplies whenever possible. Housing with well water should be regularly tested, at least once per year. Appropriate treatment systems should be used and records kept about water tests and treatment.

Septic systems should be cleaned and maintained regularly.

**Laundry Systems**
Any temporary or seasonal housing requires a washer and dryer or wash tub and clothes line for every 25 workers.

**Heating Systems**
Take time to instruct workers on how to operate the heating system. Point out that if rooms are too hot the thermostat should be lowered rather than opening doors or windows. Locate the thermostat inside the housing and away from the doors so that an average temperature of 68 degree F can be maintained in the housing during the cold months.
Waste Management
Provide a system for garbage removal at least once every two weeks. Provide garbage containers that are large enough to meet residents' needs and have tight closing lids.

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May 8, 2018