

# The Invisible Ones

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## SPEAKERS

Neza Xiuhtecutli, Ricky Telg, Phillip Stokes

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### **R** Ricky Telg 00:04

This is Science by the Slice, a podcast from the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Center for Public Issues Education. In this podcast, experts discuss the science of issues affecting our daily lives, reveal the motivations behind the decisions people make, and ultimately provide insight to solutions for our lives.

### **P** Phillip Stokes 00:36

Welcome to Science by the Slice, my name is Phillip Stokes Education Coordinator with the PIE Center and you're listening to the third episode in our series, The Essential Worker. I'm sure many of you know that agriculture is a major contributor to the state economy of Florida and a major producer of many commodities. In fact, over 15,000 square miles of Florida is farmland, approximately the size of Massachusetts and Connecticut combined. And many of Florida's leading crops including strawberries, watermelons, bell peppers, and tomatoes, just to name a few, are very labor intensive and most of these are harvested by migrant and seasonal farmworkers by hand. Between 150,000 and 200,000 migrant and seasonal farm workers and their families travel and work in Florida annually. In fact, it's estimated that about 33,000 workers are needed to pick tomatoes, and that's just one commodity. Clearly, farmworkers are an essential part of the workforce in Florida and a major contributor when thinking about how food gets to our tables. And today I speak with Neza Xiuhtecutli, the General Coordinator and Principal Investigator for the Farmworker Association of Florida.

### **N** Neza Xiuhtecutli 01:55

My name is Neza Xiuhtecutli, I'm the General Coordinator of the Farmworker Association of Florida. I was born in Mexico, and I grew up in South Carolina and North Carolina and been in Florida since 2011. In 2016, I joined the association as part of the research team. I kind of told myself, you know, the kind of work that I want is something that will allow me to travel and something that'll let me see the real Florida. Because I had been to Orlando a few times and I knew that the theme parks, as much revenue as they bring to the state, are not really the

whole picture of what Florida is. So I just wanted to see was something else something that allowed me to interact with Floridians. Low and behold be careful what you ask for, because that's what I got. So I joined the team in 2016. That has really brought me to almost every little rural corner of the state.

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Phillip Stokes 02:54

Neza became the General Coordinator in 2020, and has been in that role ever since. The Farmworker Association of Florida has a long standing mission to build power among the farmworker and rural, low income communities. Established in 1983 in Orange County, Florida, the Farmworker Association is now statewide, with offices in Pierson, Fellemsmere, Immokalee, Homestead, and Apopka, which is their headquarters. So now, let's pick back up with my conversation with Neza as I asked him about who the association serves.

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Phillip Stokes 03:36

Hello Neza, thank you so much for joining us on the PIE Center's podcast, Science by the Slice. It's so great to have you with me today. Can you just tell us a little bit about who is your audience who are the individuals that you serve? You know, the Farmworkers Association has such an important role. So who is the audience that the Farmworkers association serves?

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Neza Xiuhtecutli 03:58

We work primarily with farmworkers. And we have our five offices. But they're not just farm workers who are in those areas where our offices are located. We are happy to help any farmworker throughout the state of Florida. And we started out as a membership organization. So to be part of the Farmworkers Association, you become a member. That membership takes the form of an ID that some counties will accept as a form of identification so that can seem really handy for some of our members who don't have an immigration status but some some communities will allow them to use those those membership cards as a form of ID. Of course, that doesn't mean that they are driver's licenses of course they cannot use them to vote or anything like that, but you know, with access to health centers. This is a form of ID to report crime or anything like that, you know, they they can, they can use our membership cards. But we don't just serve farmworkers we also work with, we really work primarily in rural communities. But really anybody who comes to us looking for help, we won't turn them away, we have the resources to help them. And also as many farmworkers start in agriculture and then move on to other industries. Primarily, we see men moving into landscaping or construction work in farmworker women moving to either childcare or housekeeping then we, you know they continue being members of our organization, and often they continue being involved. So although we do work primarily with farmworkers, our membership includes people in other industries.

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Phillip Stokes 05:59

Yeah, yeah. So what are some of the reasons why some people might come to the Farmworkers Association? What are some of the issues and concerns people may have within their occupational field?

occupational health.

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Neza Xiuhtecutli 06:14

Well, a lot of them come because of that of that membership card because it is accepted as a form of ID. But we also offer trainings in primarily heat and pesticide exposure, how to prevent it, raise awareness among workers. We also work with some growers going out to them and saying, hey, you know, we would have these trainings and we offer to you at no cost, you know, it's just what we really want is to help protect the workers to make sure that they know what they can do to protect themselves. And also, so that they know what their rights are as workers. But, you know, we're happy to work with with employers to. The last thing that we want to do is put workers out of work. What we want to do is just make sure that they are protected, and that they know how to take care of themselves. And that they feel confident asking for for those protections, and advocating for themselves.

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Phillip Stokes 07:17

You mentioned that some come in for that ID card, because they may not be documented. Does that make up the majority of your membership?

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Neza Xiuhtecutli 07:26

At the national level, I understand that about a little over 50% of farmworkers are undocumented even though something like 75% of them are immigrants. I think within our membership, within our membership, it's probably closer to that national average of immigrants who who come in looking for that for that membership card form of ID because they don't have an immigration status.

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Phillip Stokes 08:05

What are some of the other challenges that they face maybe in being undocumented?

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Neza Xiuhtecutli 08:11

One, one of them is not able to get a driver's license, so they can't drive. Some do take the risk of driving without a driver's license, but some don't, and they just they have to pay somebody to drive them around to and from work. So that creates an additional expense that they may if that's happened, it creates a barrier to get access to other, to enjoy some of the amenities that our society offers obliging, you know, even enjoying a leisure Sunday drive just becomes an obstacle. They also have to pay somebody to travel to the grocery store and drive them back. A lot of them don't make enough money. They live below the poverty line. So they but because they're undocumented, they also don't qualify for for Medicaid or any kind of assistance from the federal government for for their for their healthcare needs. We are seeing more H-2A workers which are the guest workers but they I don't think most of them know it, but they do qualify and they're eligible for getting insurance through the Affordable Care Act

marketplace, but most most of them don't even know what that is. And then I would say that just just the mere fact of being undocumented prevents them from from speaking out for themselves, just advocating for themselves because they fear that any kind of any kind of issue they bring up might result in retaliation in being let go or being replaced by another worker who is more willing to give us talk not speak out.

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Phillip Stokes 10:10

Right. Right. Yeah, it sounds like a number of challenges that if, if you've never experienced that, if you've never been an immigrant, if you've never lived, that, it's just hard to comprehend what that would be like. And so I can imagine, yeah, that would be difficult, and also scary at times. And so, yeah, I think that's what I'm seeing is, you know, probably one of the really great resources of the Farmworkers Association, to provide some assistance there. Yeah. And you mentioned, you do trainings on heat stress and pesticide safety. Yeah, what are some of the the main activities, you know, besides those trainings that you offer to your members?

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Neza Xiuhtecutli 10:58

We also hold community events and we do have a civic engagement program. So out of those trainings, we also hear from, from our members, or anybody that's coming to those trainings, about the issues that they're facing at work. And then we invite them to be part of the Civic democratic process, because we also hold candidate forums, and we do legislative visits. So whenever we have any of those events, we invite them to come and voice their concerns and their opinions. And really, the the mission and vision of the association is for farmworkers to build power among farm workers so that they advocate for themselves. So I said earlier that the last thing we want to do is put workers out of work but but our goal really is to put ourselves out of work, because we want for workers for farmworkers to be able to advocate for themselves without the need of an organization like ours.

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Phillip Stokes 12:03

So you know, one topic that is kind of a common thread in this podcast series that we're doing on agricultural health and safety is the disconnection between people and their food. And that includes the people that harvest and plant and grow the food as well. So what is it that you would like the listeners to know here today? What would you like them to know about the work and the risks and the hazards? So it kind of just to help sort of provide a full picture of what this livelihood and what this work looks like?

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Neza Xiuhtecutli 12:42

Yeah, I think the first thing I would want to say is that it's really hard work. Probably doesn't come as a surprise to anybody. But it is hard work. And they spend a lot of time outside and just like, just like being outside, if you're going out camping or spending any time doing outside, you really are exposed to the elements. So I think that is just something that I feel like sometimes doesn't get enough attention. We often talk in organization about heat exposure. And it is one of the biggest threats that we work with. The latest statistic I have is that

farmworkers are 35% not 35%, 35 times more likely to die of heatstroke than workers in other occupations. But working outside, they're also exposed to rain, lightning, smoke, and, of course, through the wind they sometimes also get exposed to pesticides, through pesticide drift. And I want to go back to smoke because we often hear about fires, forest fires taking place in out west in California or Colorado, places like that, but but we also do get forest fires in Florida. And because they're not of the same scale that we see out west doesn't mean that they're not producing a significant amount of smoke that farmworkers sometimes just without even realizing it are breathing it in. And that can lead to respiratory illnesses later on.

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Phillip Stokes 14:30

Right. Yeah, you know, I would think that I would assume and I'd like to get your input on this, but I would assume that sometimes health kind of gets put aside because you know, your main motivation is going to be doing your job so you can you can collect your paycheck and so you can provide for your family and and for whoever you're providing for. And a lot of times if you don't if you're not proactive and take preventative measures, then you might have some of these health issues later on. Is that what you have seen with some of the workers that you work with?

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Neza Xiuhtecutli 15:11

Yeah, and I would say going back to heat that is, especially where I see it, because a lot of agricultural workers get paid by the piece rate, meaning that they get paid for what they harvest or pick or cut depending on what they're working on. And they'll often keep working even, even after they realize that they're thirsty that they've been sweating for a while and not take breaks, because they, you know, for them, it means having to stop and making money. But also stopping means that the person next to them is going to be picking whatever they would be picking. So they're in essence competing against their own co-workers and crew members. And I think, also for that reason, sometimes they they don't recognize that they need to, they stop drinking water because they don't want to take restroom breaks. So they by trying to work harder and not take as many breaks, they're also not hydrating as often as they should. So that is a point that we that we often try to make with them because you know, drink water drink, drink often. Drink atleast a bottle of water an hour just to stay hydrated.

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Phillip Stokes 16:29

Right. Right. Yeah. It seems like that educational component would just be so important would be so important. Because health may not be maybe it should be but it may not be the top priority when when they're when they're out there and they're working. And maybe not thinking about that.

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Neza Xiuhtecutli 16:50

Yeah, I guess I would say that, um, farmworkers don't get paid a lot. They don't have access to health care. They often don't have a way to get around. And living in rural areas, there aren't that many health care centers where they can go to. Health care it really just is one of the main

issues for them too. And then not being able to catch anything early enough. So the screening like that lack of access just puts a barrier on screening. So oftentimes, they don't even find out about a chronic disease until it's like really chronic. Till it's advanced.

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Phillip Stokes 17:31

Yeah, yeah. Do you find health care providers aren't always kind of up to date on some of the risks of farmworker worker injuries or farm worker hazards and risks?

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Neza Xiuhtecutli 17:48

I would say that I think one of the main things that need to be addressed is getting healthcare providers to change their mindset when they're treating somebody to also ask questions related to occupational health and hazards. Because we have heard from workers that that go to a clinic and they come with rashes but the health care provider doesn't think to ask, oh, like, where do you work? And I think just asking where do you work might bring up a line of questioning and information that would lead to like, oh, you know, maybe, maybe you got exposed to something maybe it's residue and it might not be but at least at least we're covering all areas.

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Phillip Stokes 18:41

Right. I guess kind of one of my last questions. What would you say are some of the impacts of the Farmworkers Association of Florida that maybe are most notable?

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Neza Xiuhtecutli 18:54

I think it was in 2004 we had an organizer in Pierson, who was very active in very involved and he had been a farm worker himself. His name was (inaudible). He died in an accident himself. His car collided with a train. But he had been working on some time for some time on for workers to be transported inside an enclosed vehicle instead of like having like the back of a pickup truck or anything that was kind of open air. And then in 2004, a bill was passed that actually required in Florida for farmworkers to be transported in like an enclosed vehicle instead of being transported on the back of a pickup truck. So I think that that's one of the one of the biggest ones we've seen. We have been advocating for better heat protections for farmworkers and OSHA is taking it up this year as one of its one of its tasks is to to come up with a set of protections that can be adapted across the board for all workers exposed to heat. So I would say just the fact that that is being taken up now is a win. Then earlier this year in the Florida Legislature, we had a state senator from Miami Dade (inaudible) introduced a bill that would have provided protections for workers. That bill was really more about education than enforcement, and actually passing a culture committee. But it stalled in the other committees. So it didn't pass it. But that's the farthest a bill like that has gone in Florida so we're hopeful that it can be reintroduced, if not by her by another legislator, but we would like to see something like that passed at the state level.

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Phillip Stokes 21:10

Yeah, it does sound like advocating at the legislative level and trying to get better laws and guidelines in place to assist farmworkers, that's one of the big things that you can do to help, like you said, empower farmworkers, empower workers and kind of give them a bigger voice. And I think through legislative action, that's one of the best and most broad ways that it can be done. Well, Neza do you have any other things you want to talk about anything we didn't touch on?

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Neza Xiuhtecutli 21:44

I would just say that it's really important that we come up with some kind of immigration reform, because I think that's the biggest barrier that farmworkers face just not being able to advocate for themselves. Even if they find a friendly environment, they don't feel safe and confident advocating for themselves. But then we also have people are choosing to vilify immigrants, and then that just creates a really toxic environment where they don't, they don't really feel comfortable, or confident at all, just advocating for themselves.

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Phillip Stokes 22:19

Well, Neza I just want to thank you for being on the PIE Center's podcast, Science by the Slice. If people want to get in touch, or find out more about the association, where would you point them?

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Neza Xiuhtecutli 22:31

Well, they can visit our website, [Floridafarmworkers dot o-r-g](http://Floridafarmworkers.org). They can also follow us on Facebook, Instagram and on Twitter. I don't know the exact user names for Facebook and Instagram, but on Twitter, we're @FWAFL.

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Phillip Stokes 22:52

Great. Great. Well, Neza once again, thank you so much. I appreciate your time.

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Neza Xiuhtecutli 22:57

Thank you, Phillip. Appreciate you appreciate the invitation.

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Ricky Telg 23:04

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