

BUILDING RESILIENT AGRICULTURAL COMMUNITIES

A Working Forum on Mental Health Outreach and Community-Based Support for Minnesota Farmers, Agricultural Workers, and their Families

June 20, 2018

Cargill Building
University of Minnesota, St. Paul campus



Executive Summary

PURPOSE OF FORUM:

UMASH and the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) hosted a one-day working forum to bring together stakeholders from across Minnesota to explore the stress and mental health challenges that farmers, agricultural workers, and their families experience and stimulate new and existing partnerships to identify gaps in community-based programs and health services. A total of 69 attendees represented many sectors important to agriculture, including farmers, farm workers, health care, public health, government agencies, universities, extension service, elected officials, faith-based organizations, philanthropies, and financial intuitions. The overarching goal of the forum was to stimulate new and existing partnerships to identify and respond to gaps in community-based programs and health services.

Specific objectives of the forum were to:

- Bring together diverse perspectives to explore the availability, accessibility, affordability and acceptability of mental health outreach and support, as well as approaches to manage farm stress of farmers, agricultural workers and their families in Minnesota;
- Identify gaps and challenges around stress and mental health outreach and support in agricultural communities;
- Brainstorm opportunities and innovative strategies for building community-based resilience;
- Cultivate partnerships to improve availability, accessibility, affordability and acceptability of stress and mental health outreach and support for Minnesota farmers, agricultural workers and their families

In the morning, Bruce Alexander (UMASH) and Meg Moynihan (Farmer and MDA) offered overviews about the prevalence and persistence of stress factors that negatively affect mental health, followed by a panel discussion. The afternoon was dedicated to a workshop of group discussions about *Accessibility, Affordability, Acceptability and Availability (the “four ‘A’s”)* of mental health and resilience resources for farmers, agricultural workers and their families.

PANEL PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

The panelists Doris Mold (Farmer, and MN Agri-women), Cynthie Christensen (RN and Counselor), Gene Hugoson (Farmer and former Commissioner of Agriculture), Paul Force-Emery Mackie (Mankato State and Past President of National Association of Rural Mental Health), and Gloria Contreras (Board President Manos Latinas)

addressed wide ranging issues and challenges. Several themes emerged, though the specific nature varied by population affected, e.g. farmer, farm worker, men and women, age group, marital status, financial status.

- Numerous external stimuli influence negative mental and physical health outcomes, including market or commodity price fluctuations, global and national politics, and public perceptions of farmers, farm workers, or farming.
- The effects of these stressors are manifest through a wide range of signs and symptoms including: depression, anxiety, gastrointestinal problems, sleep disturbances, weight changes, substance abuse, hygiene changes, withdrawal from public life, and relationship problems, and may ultimately lead to severe outcomes including suicide.
- The burden of stressors on immigrant agricultural workers are enhanced due to social pressures, limited access to support services and lack of opportunities for time for rest and relaxation due to limited income and opportunities.
- Isolation, physical distances and lack of infrastructure (including technology), cultural factors, immigration status, and interpersonal dynamics, and a strong sense of independence create barriers to obtaining necessary support and care.
- A key construct noted in the discussion was early detection: the importance of identifying the gap between early onset of the effects of stress when support is needed and the severe consequences of the stress.

GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Facilitated small group discussions scanned, prioritized and selected specific approaches to address issues around the four “A”s of resources necessary to manage stress and mental health in agricultural populations.

Participants identified a number of challenges across the four “A”s:

- infrastructure challenges to accessing care
- lack of systematic screening programs
- general lack of awareness regarding the pervasiveness of the problem
- barriers to accessing care that are specific to undocumented immigrants
- cost of care and lack of or inadequate health insurance
- few specialized providers
- lack of cultural competency of providers
- lack of knowledge regarding appropriate resources
- changing landscape of farmers and farming culture
- stigma of admitting symptoms and seeking or accepting help

Priorities fell into four broad categories:

- public health **outreach and awareness** campaigns targeting specific groups,
- **policy** changes to improve access and affordability,
- **research** regarding the efficacy of screening programs and,
- broader **training** in mental health first-aid

The final step identified specific approaches and identify key stakeholders, resources needed, and initial action steps. These included:

- Build public awareness campaigns and storytelling to normalize the experience of stress and different mechanisms to seek assistance. Having multilingual resources is especially important. Participants identified podcasts, blogs, and other social media as important communication methods.
- Create assessment and evaluation tools to be used on oneself or others to help indicate when it's time to seek assistance.
- Develop a network of extenders to provide ongoing, specialized training and support across the state with a focus on agricultural workers.
- Train community members who regularly interact with farmers and farm workers to recognize early signs of stress and refer the individual to appropriate resources.
- Develop screening programs to identify people who are at risk for adverse mental health outcomes early and refer to support or treatment.
- Engage local healthcare providers, religious leaders and community champions for training and creating a screening program as an initial step.

NEXT STEPS

This Forum provided a framework to translate ideas into action. Organizers and attendees recognized they could not address the complexity of the problems in one afternoon, but that initial directions could be charted. To build upon this momentum and promote partnerships, UMASH has released a **Request for Proposals** for assistance to generate new ideas that address mental health and resilience in farmers, farm workers and their families in the Upper Midwest.

⇒ **Full details regarding proposals are available on the UMASH website at umash.umn.edu/agresilience**

One page pre-proposals are due August 3.

After review, selected applicants will be invited to submit full proposals.

Direct questions regarding the seed grants or content of the forum to umash@umn.edu.

UMASH and MDA sincerely thank the forum participants and look forward to the next steps in addressing this critical public health need.