
MILK WITH DIGNITY

2018-2024 PROGRAM REPORT



Published October 2024

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Standards Council

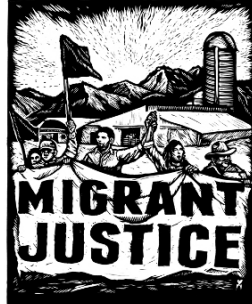
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Milk with Dignity
STANDARDS COUNCIL

www.milkwithdignity.org
info@milkwithdignity.org

JUSTICIA MIGRANTE



www.migrantjustice.net
info@migrantjustice.net

WSR **WORKER-DRIVEN
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www.wsr-network.org

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photo credit: Migrant Justice

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Seven years ago, a group of immigrant farmworkers joined hands with a corporate CEO from a global dairy brand. To resounding applause, both parties signed an agreement binding a corporation at the top of the dairy supply chain to the workers at the bottom. In that moment, ice cream maker Ben and Jerry's – responding to years of campaigning by Vermont-based human rights organization Migrant Justice and consumer demand for worker protections in its supply chain – committed itself to upholding the human rights of the people who sustain the dairy industry. On that day, the Milk with Dignity Program was born.

Milk with Dignity joined the ranks of Worker-driven Social Responsibility (WSR) programs all over the world. From farming to garment manufacturing, construction, and other industries where laborers toil in the shadows, WSR holds companies accountable for conditions in their supply chains and empowers workers to be frontline defenders of their own human rights.

Since that time, the Program has grown. Workers on Milk with Dignity-enrolled farms have seen life-changing improvements to their labor conditions, their wages and benefits, and health and safety protections found nowhere else in the nation's dairy industry. Through partnerships with state and local governments and nonprofit organizations, farms have been able to build new housing units for workers long denied dignified living conditions. By calling the 24-hour support line, workers have been able to prevent or remediate instances of physical violence commonly unaddressed on farms outside the Milk with Dignity Program. Farmers who joined this program seven years ago are familiar with their responsibilities to workers and reach out to preempt violations of labor rights before they happen. And Milk with Dignity is tackling the pernicious issue of child labor in agriculture by working with farmers and supporting farmworker families to keep young people out of prohibited employment.

Daniel, who worked at a farm outside of Milk with Dignity before coming to a farm enrolled in the Program, explains that "everything is better: the housing, the work, the schedule, and how they treat you." This septennial report documents these achievements, delineating the transformations made possible by workers organized to defend their rights, farm owners willing to forge collaborative solutions, and corporations who are responsive to the public

demand for dignified conditions in their supply chains.

This Program Report is the fourth in Milk with Dignity's history. Readers can find all four reports at migrantjustice.net/reports. We invite you to join us in celebrating farmworkers' victories as we look ahead to a future in which every day is a new day for human rights in the dairy industry.

MILK WITH DIGNITY BY THE NUMBERS

256 qualifying workers on 54 participating farms across 2 states

20% of Vermont's total dairy production covered by the Program

\$5.35 million invested in workers' wages and bonuses and in improvements to labor and housing conditions

1,611 inquiries from workers and farmers on the 24/7 Worker Support Line

611 violations of the farmworker-authored Code of Conduct resolved following worker complaints

212 farm audits, including 941 farmworker interviews, 315 management interviews, 268 worksite inspections, and 218 housing unit inspections

2,281 audit findings addressed through Corrective Action Plans agreed to by farmers

247 Program education sessions, with 1,291 worker and manager participants



photo credit: John Willis

MILK WITH DIGNITY: A NEW DAY FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

CREATING MILK WITH DIGNITY

The Milk with Dignity Program was created by Migrant Justice, a human rights organization founded and led by immigrant farmworkers in Vermont. After years of working to improve conditions on dairy farms through worksite organizing, legislative advocacy, and legal channels – and coming up against the limitations of those strategies – Migrant Justice connected with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a group of tomato pickers from south-central Florida.

The CIW is the force behind the Fair Food Program, a pioneering application of an innovative model of supply chain organizing called “Worker-driven Social Responsibility” (WSR). Through a series of agreements with some of the largest companies in the world, the Fair Food Program has transformed Florida’s tomato’s industry, raising wages and stamping out human rights abuses. Fair Food has since expanded to produce fields around the country – and more recently, internationally – covering tens of thousands of workers.

Dairy workers built Milk with Dignity in the mold of the Fair Food Program, applying the principles of

WSR to their context in the Northeast dairy industry. Farmworkers developed a Code of Conduct that set standards for wages, scheduling, health and safety, and housing, as well as protections against discrimination, harassment, violence, and unjust firings. Workers also created the Milk with Dignity Standards Council (MDSC), a nonprofit third party auditor, to objectively monitor farms’ compliance with the standards in the Code.

HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS

Companies join Milk with Dignity by signing contracts that commit them to source from dairy farms enrolled in the Program. They also commit to pay those participating farms a premium to incentivize their participation in the Program and subsidize the costs of compliance with the Code of Conduct.

When a farm enrolls in Milk with Dignity, it agrees to change labor and housing conditions as needed to meet the Code’s standards. Employers and employees on participating farms attend regular education sessions conducted by Migrant Justice on the rights guaranteed by the Program and how workers can enforce those rights.

PROGRAM ENROLLMENT

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Number of Qualifying Workers	255	262	262	209	196	204	256
Total Participating Farms	71	64	62	51	50	48	54
“Active” farms*	54	51	52	41	39	38	42
“Inactive” farms*	17	13	10	10	11	10	12
Percentage of B&J’s dairy purchases	100%+ Northeast supply	100%+ Northeast supply	100%+ Northeast supply	100%+ Northeast supply	100%+ Northeast supply	98%+ Northeast supply	100%+ National supply

*Active farms are farms that employ at least one Qualifying Worker. Inactive farms are farms with no non-family, non-managerial hired employees who milk or do other qualifying work.

Workers have access to a 24/7 Support Line, with strong protections against retaliation. MDSC promptly investigates complaints and collaborates with farmers and workers to achieve speedy resolutions to Code violations. MDSC also conducts regular farm audits by inspecting worksites and housing units, and interviewing workers and managers, to create a holistic assessment of the farm’s Code compliance, resulting in individualized “Corrective Action Plans.”

Workers have access to a 24/7 Support Line, with strong protections against retaliation.

These mutually reinforcing mechanisms allow MDSC both to understand the complex realities that workers and farms experience, and to craft appropriate corrective measures for participating farms. As full compliance is the ultimate goal of the Program, MDSC works collaboratively with farms to create plans and timelines that reflect each farm’s unique circumstances. However, if farms are consistently unwilling to make the necessary adjustments to meet Code standards, they will face suspension from the Program and the market consequences that follow. While suspended, farms lose purchase preference and the Premium paid by participating buyers.

IMPLEMENTATION AND ENROLLMENT

Migrant Justice approached global ice cream maker Ben & Jerry’s in 2014 with an invitation to become Milk with Dignity’s first participating buyer. After three years of discussions and public campaigning – at times collaborative, at times contentious – Ben & Jerry’s joined the Program. By early 2018, enough farms had enrolled in Milk with Dignity to account for more than 100% of Ben & Jerry’s Northeast supply chain, making up roughly 20% of Vermont’s entire dairy industry by volume.

After a few years, farm enrollment in Milk with Dignity began to decline, as pandemic-related closures and the long-term industry trend towards farm consolidation affected the Program. Additionally, some farms – unwilling to take corrective actions to address serious rights violations – withdrew from, or were suspended by, the Program. In 2023, for the first time, the volume of milk produced by MD-enrolled farms dipped below the Program index of Ben & Jerry’s Northeast dairy purchases.

To address these challenges, the Program took decisive action. Ben & Jerry’s updated its commitment from 100% of the volume equivalent of its *Northeast* dairy purchases to 100% of its *national* purchases. This change allowed Milk with Dignity to begin recruiting new farms and increasing Program enrollment. By mid-2024, Milk with Dignity had grown to cover 256 qualifying farmworkers – one more than when the Program launched.



photo credit: Terry Allen



photo credit: John Willis

LOOKING AHEAD

As Milk with Dignity expands to cover more farms and protect more workers, the Program has also updated its Code of Conduct. Farmworkers developed the original document to codify their definition of dignified working and living conditions. Over the years, the Code's 64 provisions provided the framework for the tremendous improvements the Program has achieved for hundreds of workers. Years of implementation also highlighted areas where vague language or oversights limited effective enforcement.

Through a consultative process within the Milk with Dignity Working Group – a body composed of Participating Farmers and Qualifying Workers – the Program updated its Code of Conduct for the first time. Updated provisions will result in an additional paid holiday; prompt compliance with annual wage raises; payment of sick leave

to new and part-time workers; longer rest periods between shifts; the provision of internet, washers, and dryers in farmworker housing; stronger protections against retaliation and intimidation; and the payment of a \$50 monthly bonus to an expanded pool of workers. We are excited to track the implementation of these new Code measures and to share the benefits to farms and farmworkers in the next Program report.

As Milk with Dignity develops and matures, it continues to bring about the “new day” that workers envisioned when they launched the Program seven years ago. Natán (seen on the report cover) sums it up:

“Thanks to Milk with Dignity, we have benefits, we have rights. There’s a lot that we’ve achieved as workers.”

SPOTLIGHT: BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS FOR FARMWORKER HOUSING

Housing standards are an essential component of the Milk with Dignity Code of Conduct. Outside of the Program, dairy workers often live in dilapidated trailers – or in makeshift units built into barns – with virtually no enforcement of tenants’ rights or health and safety requirements. Within the Program, the 24-hour support line, annual housing inspections, and ongoing collaborations with farmers and farmworkers has ensured prompt action to address many violations of the housing code. Hundreds of workers have benefited from improvements to heating and ventilation, window and drywall repairs, pest control, fire safety enforcement, privacy protections, and more.

However, since 2020, unprecedented construction and material costs have made total compliance with housing standards a major stumbling block for farms – particularly when significant renovations or new housing construction projects are required to address underlying structural issues. Oliver Manning, the owner of a farm enrolled in the Program (see case study on the following page), related the challenge: “The biggest obstacle we faced in replacing our housing was cost. With so much volatility in milk prices it can be hard to find extra money to replace housing, especially with the price of housing materials increasing so much during and after Covid.”

While the Milk with Dignity Premium remains a powerful tool to support the costs of compliance with Code measures related to wages and benefits, the Premium on its own has not been enough to support heavily indebted farms to invest in large capital costs like new housing.

Recognizing that more help was needed, Migrant Justice partnered with others around Vermont and organized to secure new state funding for farmworker housing. The Milk with Dignity Standards Council has supported farmers in gaining access to both state and federal housing funds, through a collaboration with entities like the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board and the Champlain Housing Trust. The Program has also secured support from the Vermont Community Foundation and private donors to provide additional resources for farmworker housing construction.

Creating a pool of funding, however, is just the first step. MDSC and its partners also provide crucial support in navigating the complex terrain of grant applications and funding requirements. Working with

a network of organizations committed to housing solutions for farmworkers, MDSC is an essential intermediary. The Program integrates an intimate knowledge of housing conditions, hard-won trust with farmers, open communication channels with workers, and fluency in federal, state, and non-profit systems.

With support from the Program, several farmers have opted to build new Zero Energy Modular (ZEM) housing. The construction of ZEM housing has been made possible through a close partnership between MDSC, the Vermont Low Income Trust for Electricity, Efficiency Vermont, and The Working Lands Enterprise Initiative. Designed to produce as much energy as they use, these high quality, durable homes represent a major victory for farmers, farmworkers, and the climate.

Farm owner Oliver reflects on the impact of the new ZEM unit installed on his farm:

“New housing benefits the farm by providing more space for employees when they are away from work. It lowers our costs to provide housing by producing our own power with rooftop solar that will greatly reduce or eliminate our electric bill. We also have eliminated the use of fossil fuels... Workers say they greatly enjoy the new housing, and I feel it has boosted employee morale.”

Milk with Dignity’s multiple levels of intervention – advocating for public appropriations, securing private donations, and connecting farmers with funding – both ensure that farms prioritize housing improvements and provide the resources with which to do so. Between public and private funds, **Milk with Dignity has leveraged an additional \$1.2 million beyond the Program’s Premium to finance construction of new farmworker housing.** While housing availability and conditions remain a persistent challenge throughout the dairy industry, Milk with Dignity is making great strides to ensure the right to dignified housing for all workers in the Program.

“THE DAY THEY STARTED CONSTRUCTION, I CRIED”

Jania arrived in Vermont a year ago, joining her sister, brother-in-law, and young niece Marjorie, on a small dairy farm twelve miles from the northern border. In her home country of Guatemala, she had worked sorting recycling. Milking cows made her nervous at first, but she has grown more confident with the animals. Jania feels lucky she came to a farm participating in the Milk with Dignity Program. She remembers clearly her first worker-to-worker education session:

But the farm was not without its challenges: above all, the housing. When Jania’s farm entered the Program, they were required to hire an additional milker to allow all workers eight consecutive hours off to sleep and one day of rest a week. Unfortunately, an additional occupant pushed already-full worker housing to its limits. Workers were forced to share beds, and despite cosmetic improvements and attempts at pest control, the trailer was well past repair. Jania remembers:

“I was surprised. I never thought an immigrant woman like me could have rights here. I was especially surprised that there was a phone number I could call anytime if a coworker was overstepping or being inappropriate. Finding the Program, and people for whom my rights matter, it’s been something really beautiful.”

“There were always pests and vermin. No amount of scrubbing made it clean.”

Protected by Milk with Dignity’s anti-retaliation provisions, and with the support of Standards Council staff, workers began to advocate for new housing in 2020. For the farmers, amidst the instability of Covid-19 and the resulting surge in construction costs, new housing seemed an impossible expense – even with the additional financial security of the Milk with

Dignity Premium. Recognizing a genuine funding gap, the MDSC began researching and making connections with local, state, and federal funding sources. For workers, the slow progress was frustrating. Turnover at the farm was high because of the poor housing conditions. Jania’s brother-in-law Ervin was one of the long-term workers advocating for new housing. “Every meeting with the farm, we would bring it up. We pushed and pushed. The Program was a huge support, but we workers were the ones keeping up the pressure,” he said. Three years later, the research and advocacy paid off, and the installation of a five-bedroom, two-bathroom Zero Energy Modular Housing unit began. Jania remembers:

I didn’t believe they would really build it. I was so emotional the day they started construction, I cried. I just never thought we could have something like this. To have a space for your own clothes and the privacy of your own room - it’s transformative.

In the new house, every worker has their own room. The kitchen is clean, pest-free, and filled with natural light. “We’re so much more comfortable cooking,” Jania reflects. “You don’t have to worry about waking anyone up!” Now, instead of a sleeping mat, the common room has a comfortable couch and a dining area where workers can hang out after work. MD Code provisions protect workers’ rights to receive visitors in farmworker housing, meaning they can host meals and invite friends from nearby farms.

One housemate, Felipe, is particularly pleased with the addition of a television. He likes to watch the Mexican news every night to stay connected with home, and much prefers the large screen to watching headlines on his phone. Felipe agrees with Jania that the newfound privacy has transformed the living and working environment.

We’re all less stressed out. In the old house, my roommate and I worked alternating shifts and traded off sleeping in one bed. When I got home from milking at 3 a.m., he would get out of bed so I could rest. Then when he got home at 3 p.m. it would be his turn. We made it work, but I’m much more relaxed now having my own bed. I can rest on my day off. I can go to bed early or late, and make video calls with my children in Mexico without worrying about my roommate.

photo credit: Terry Allen



A worker peers through the door of one of the washing machines in his new home. Updated provisions in the Code of Conduct make clear that workers should have sufficient washers and dryers for personal use, separate from those used for farm equipment.



photo credit: Terry Allen



Before: The old trailer's kitchen was dark and cramped, with broken fixtures and missing cupboard doors. Workers constantly battled to keep food free from pest infestations.



After: The new kitchen has ample space and is filled with natural light. A kitchen island allows workers and their families to gather together for meals. Separation from bedrooms means that nobody's rest is disturbed while others cook and eat.



Before: Due to overcrowding, workers were forced to share beds, and one worker slept in the common space, separating their makeshift "bedroom" with curtains.



After: The new house has five spacious bedrooms, ensuring that each worker and their family have their own room. Air conditioning and heat exchange pumps keep workers cool in the summer and warm in the winter. "We're all less stressed out."



Before: Holes in the bathroom walls led to rodents entering the house. Exposed electrical wiring was a danger to the trailer's inhabitants. "No amount of scrubbing made it clean."



After: The new house has two bathrooms in pristine condition. The building's green design ensures a consistent supply of clean and hot water for workers' use.



Before: The trailer's youngest inhabitant, Marjorie, suffered from the old trailer's poor conditions. According to her aunt, "It was depressing to see my niece grow up, always sick and bitten by bedbugs."



After: Through Milk with Dignity, workers and their families have transformed their housing. Marjorie will now grow up in safe, hygienic, and dignified conditions. "It's just a much better environment for children."



photo credit: Terry Allen

SPOTLIGHT: A FARMER'S PERSPECTIVE ON WORKER HOUSING

Twenty years ago, we were presented with the problem of applicants wanting to work, but being homeless. At that time the dairy industry was spiraling; our net worth was smaller than our debt load. It was a grueling loan process. Through a bank loan we renovated an office and built a two-bedroom addition onto the existing barn. This created approximately 350 square feet of living space.

What was once a solution we felt good about that created safe, warm shelter quickly became too overcrowded and dismal. The living conditions created an unhappy and unhealthy environment that didn't foster employee longevity and didn't meet our own comfort level of responsibility. We were stuck. As a business, we were barely able to meet our payroll cost. Across Vermont, farms were going under at an alarming rate. We weren't in a position to solve the housing issue but still needed those employees to hang onto a farm my husband was born and raised in.

If Vermont wants to continue to be an agricultural state, with farms and cows dotting the landscape, more support is needed to meet today's employee housing needs. We are in a labor crisis industry-wide.

The only way farms can compete for that labor is to offer dignified housing with a livable wage.

More programs like Milk with Dignity and their partners are what Vermont agriculture needs to stay viable. Without that support, our housing problem would have stayed in the shadows.

Working with all the agencies was seamless and smooth. They worked with my specific needs, listening to ideas and helped me with the paperwork. I couldn't have asked for a better team. Going forward, it would be great to see more of these houses and I would be more than happy to offer tours or conversations to fellow farmers.

Our farm and our employees are beyond grateful. We are not only proud to offer this to our employees, but we are proud of the efficiencies and how Milk with Dignity has enabled us to represent the commitment socially, as well as environmentally. My milking staff are well rested now, happy to be at work and excited for their days off.

- Denna Benjamin

But perhaps the most significant legacy of the new housing will be for its youngest occupants. Jania's niece Marjorie has recently turned three. In the old house, Marjorie was frequently ill, either from pests or other indoor environmental factors. It was difficult for family members to watch. Jania remembers "It was depressing to see my niece Marjorie grow up, always sick and bitten by bedbugs." While the threat of vector-borne illness is well studied, researchers are just beginning to understand the long-term impacts of more subtle indoor environmental health hazards, like poor air quality and toxic building materials. Fortunately, Zero Energy Modular housing has high standards for the quality of its building materials and its air ventilation systems. It doesn't take a scientist to see that Marjorie is happier and healthier in the new home. "It's just a much better environment for children," Jania affirms. This new housing allows Majorie to grow up not only healthier, but surrounded by adults who are more relaxed and joyful, able to live in more dignified conditions.

The construction of new farmworker housing is a major undertaking. It's costly, time consuming, and bureaucratic. On their own, farmers face significant challenges in gaining access to funding opportunities, but the MDSC and other partners are ready to lessen the load by lifting together. And the impacts - for Jania, for Felipe, for Ervin and Majorie - are innumerable. Ervin knows that safe housing is what every farmworker deserves, and he's not ready to take no for an answer:

"Farms need us. These companies need us. If there weren't agriculture, there wouldn't be food. We deserve a dignified living. That's what everyone deserves."



photo credit: Terry Allen

LABOR CONDITIONS OUTSIDE THE PROGRAM

In 2014 – prior to the creation of Milk with Dignity – Migrant Justice coordinated a farmworker-to-farmworker survey on labor and housing conditions in the Vermont dairy industry. The survey of 172 workers provided the first-ever data on conditions for immigrant dairy workers in the northeast and played a pivotal role in the development of the Code of Conduct and the creation of the Milk with Dignity Program.

A decade on, the data was overdue for an update. While conditions on farms enrolled in the Program are exhaustively documented by the Milk with Dignity Standards Council, we wanted to know what had changed – and what had stayed the same – on farms outside the Program.

At the start of 2024, farmworker leaders at Migrant Justice began to develop a new survey. With the support of the University of Massachusetts Amherst Labor Center, Migrant Justice developed a comprehensive questionnaire covering wages, hours, health and safety, housing, and treatment on the farm. Over the spring and summer, current and former farmworkers fanned out across Vermont, conducting hour-long surveys with 212 workers in their homes, on the farm, and at community assemblies.

The results show why Milk with Dignity is so vital. Outside the Program, farmworkers continue to labor long hours for low pay, in unsafe and discriminatory working conditions, and to live in inadequate and sometimes inhumane housing.

Wages: 87% of workers make below the minimum wage, with the median wage of \$11.67 a full \$2/hour below Vermont’s state minimum. Approximately 20% have had pay illegally withheld, while one-third of workers do not receive pay stubs.

Hours and Leave: More than half of respondents work at least 12 hours per day, with more than one-quarter working seven days per week. 76% lack paid holidays, 61% lack paid vacations, and 53% don’t receive

paid sick leave. One in four workers don’t have 8 consecutive hours of rest in a day, and one in five can’t take time off if injured or sick.

Discrimination: 53% of workers report experiencing discrimination in the workplace, with most reporting discrimination based on language and country of origin. 15% report being insulted or verbally abused by an employer or supervisor. While not statistically significant, reports of physical violence against workers are pervasive throughout the industry (see page 22).

Housing: 82% of workers report issues with employer-provided housing. Common issues include housing safety concerns, pest infestations and mold, broken appliances and fixtures, insufficient heating and insulation, and workers sharing beds or sleeping in common spaces due to overcrowding.

Health and safety: 77% of respondents have suffered work-related injury or illnesses. Common dangers include being struck or crushed by cows, falling on slippery floors, and exposure to chemicals, resulting in broken bones, sprains, rashes, nosebleeds, and more. Two-thirds of workers did not receive training from an employer or supervisor, over half do not have access to a first-aid kit, and the majority lacks access to personal protective equipment such as masks, goggles, and eye wash stations.

While shocking, these conditions are not new. The results show continuity with the 2014 survey across most metrics, demonstrating the critical role of Milk with Dignity. Without the Program’s essential elements – a worker-defined Code of Conduct, the Premium paid by dairy buyers, farmworker education sessions, rigorous monitoring of conditions, and binding enforcement mechanisms with market consequences for noncompliance – the dairy industry remains unable to provide the dignified working and living conditions that farmworkers deserve.

SURVEY RESULTS ON FARMS OUTSIDE MILK WITH DIGNITY

87% of immigrant workers make less than minimum wage

82% live in unsafe or substandard housing

77% have suffered work-related health problems

53% report experiencing discrimination

51% work 12+ hours per day



photo credit: Vera Chang

MILK WITH DIGNITY CODE COMPLIANCE

FIGURE 1: MINIMUM WAGE COMPLIANCE

Milk with Dignity continues to make rapid progress to ensure that Qualifying Workers receive at least the minimum wage. Due to the Program's interventions, the percentage of workers receiving at least the minimum wage has increased significantly, even as the state minimum wages have gone up. Outside of Milk with Dignity, farmworkers face the reverse trend. Surveys conducted on non-Milk with Dignity farms in 2014 and 2024 show that minimum wage compliance has fallen drastically over the last ten years.

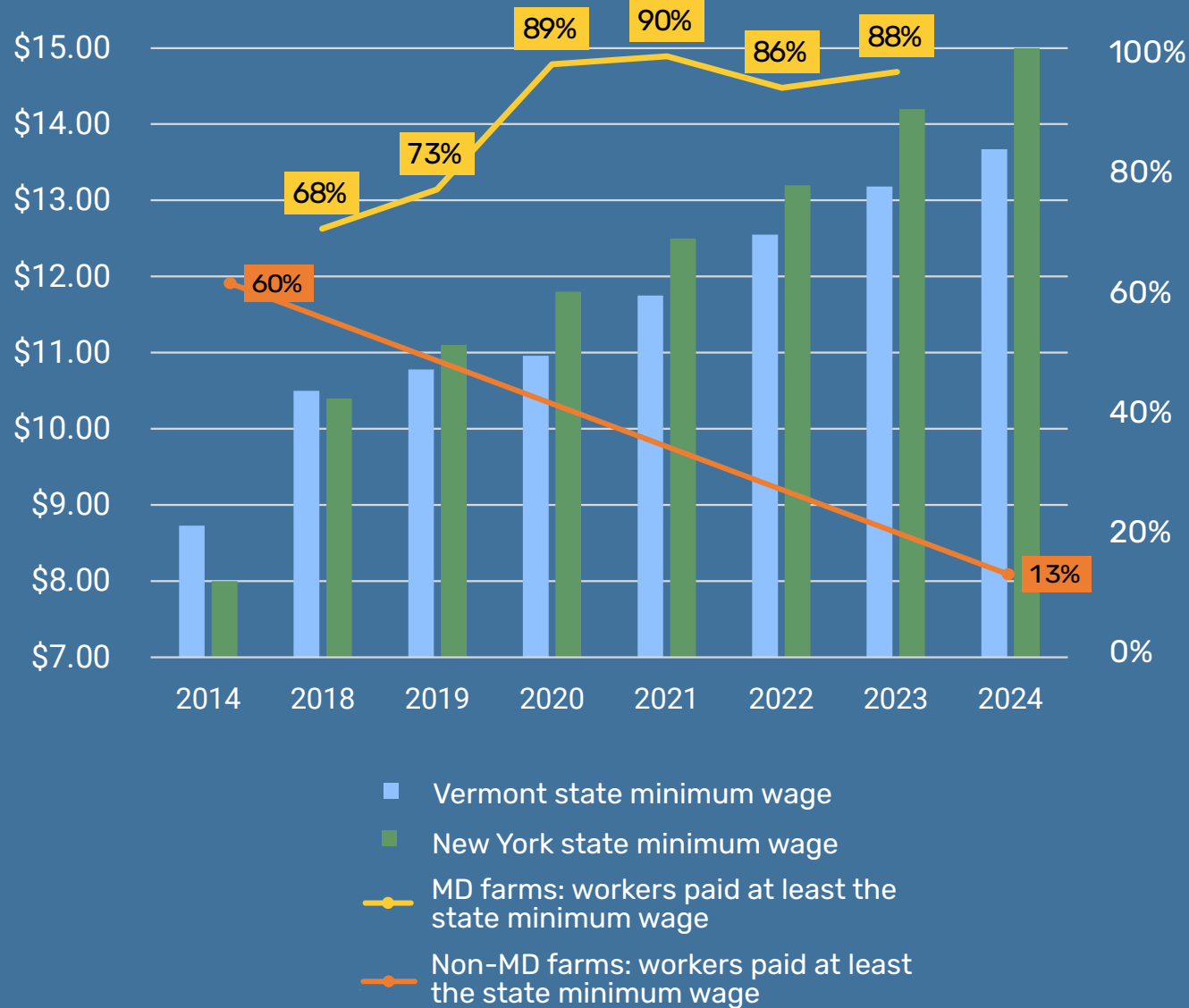


FIGURE 2: HEALTH AND SAFETY PROTECTIONS

Milk with Dignity is successfully challenging the deeply-rooted assumption that farmworkers inevitably endure unsafe working and living conditions. The Program has significantly increased provision of safety equipment in worker housing, as well as the worksite protective equipment necessary to safely handle dangerous chemicals like formaldehyde, copper sulfate, acid sanitizer, and lime.

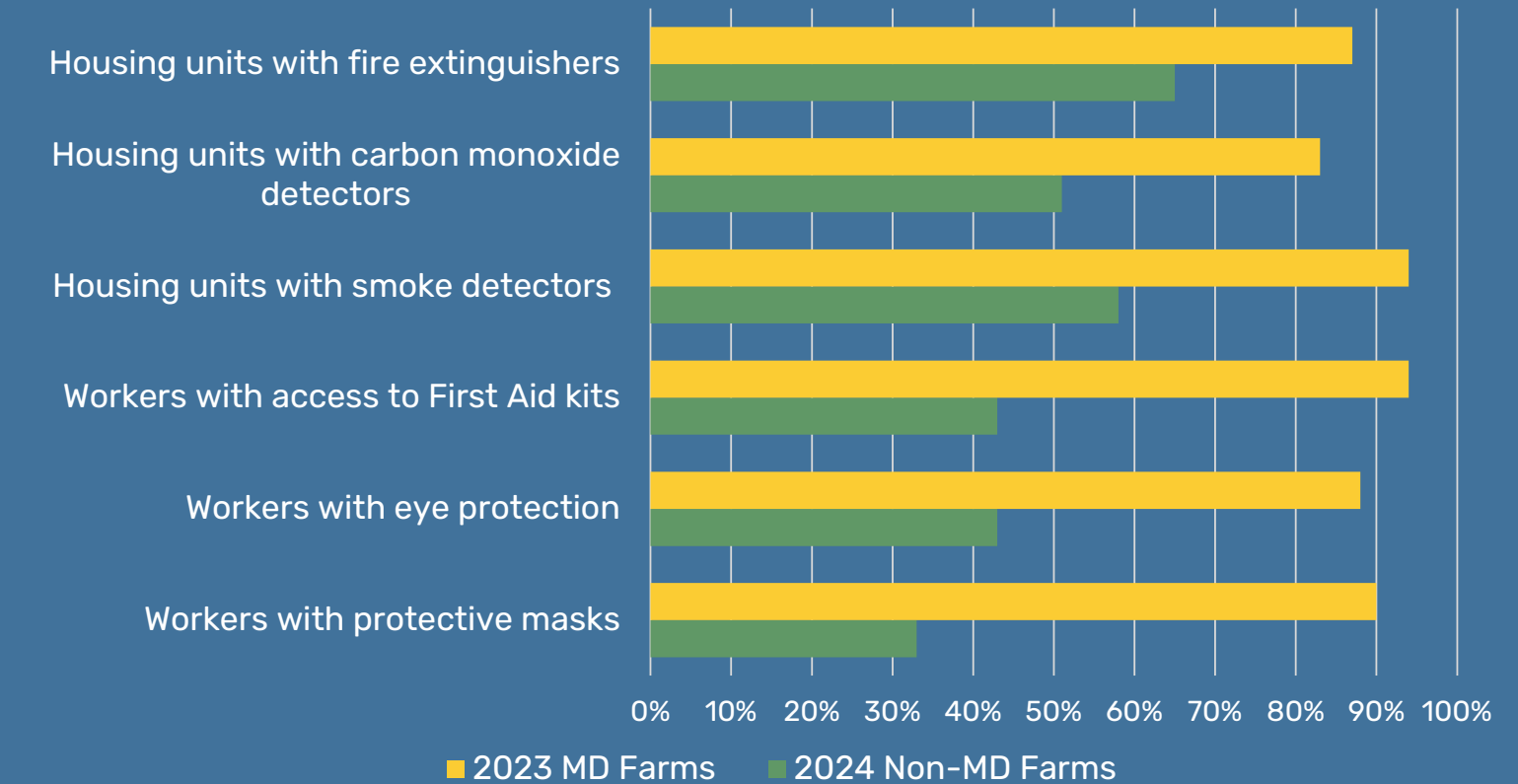


FIGURE 3: REGULAR PROVISION OF PAYSTUBS

Paystubs provide farmworkers with essential information to ensure they are paid for every hour worked. Workers use them to monitor farms' compliance with their rights related to wages, paid leave, and the Milk with Dignity Bonus, and to speak up if something isn't right.

Workers regularly receive paystubs

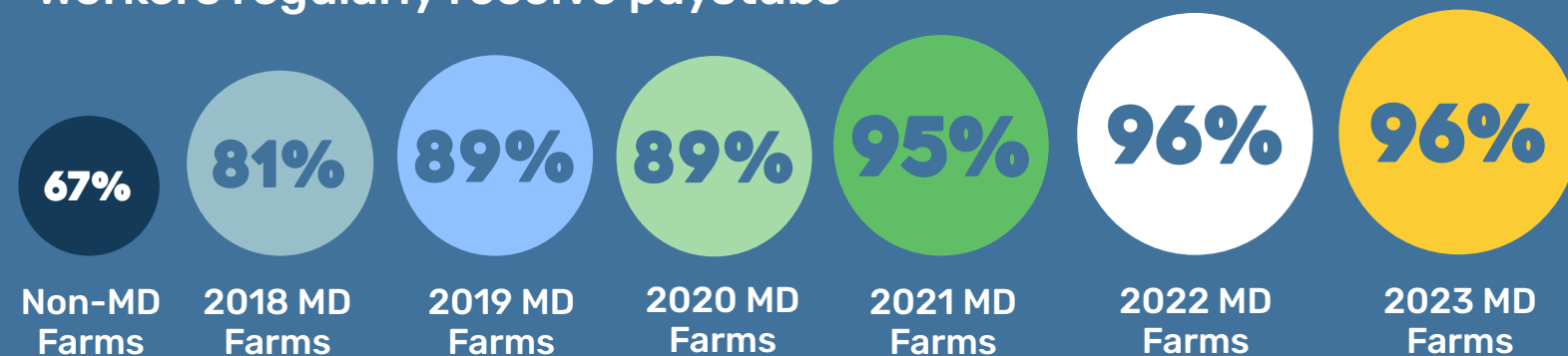


FIGURE 4: HOURS AND REST

Dairy farms run 24/7, but that doesn't mean that farmworkers have to work around the clock. Milk with Dignity is intervening to ensure sufficient rest during and between shifts, and to bring basic benefits like paid vacations and holidays – a rarity on farms outside the Program.

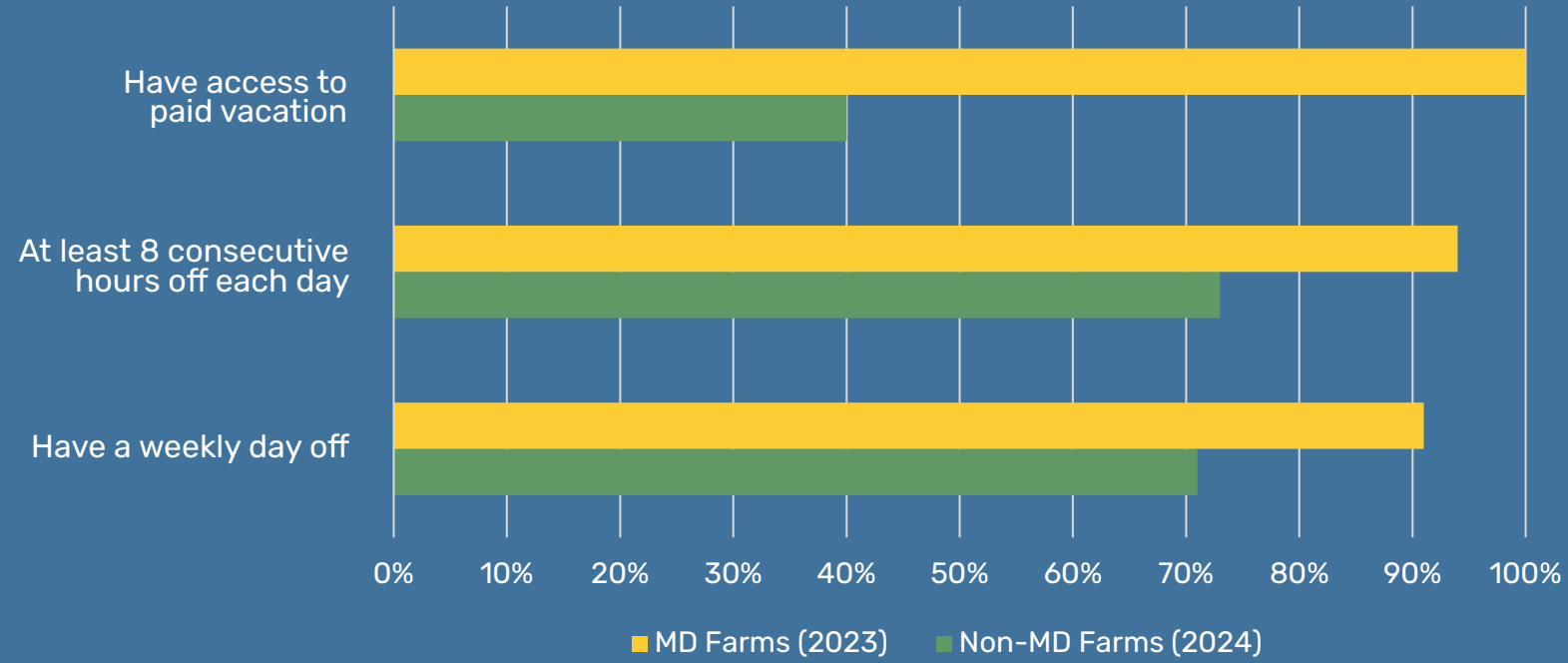


FIGURE 5: ACCESS TO SICK LEAVE ON MD FARMS

Before Milk with Dignity, paid sick leave for farmworkers was virtually unheard of, but this changed sharply upon the MD Program launch in early 2018 and has continued to improve through the present, when nearly all farmworkers on MD farms have reliable and consistent access to paid sick leave. New survey data shows that over the past seven years, more farms outside the Program have begun providing paid sick leave – just enough to catch up with the percentage of farms that came into compliance in the first year of Milk with Dignity!

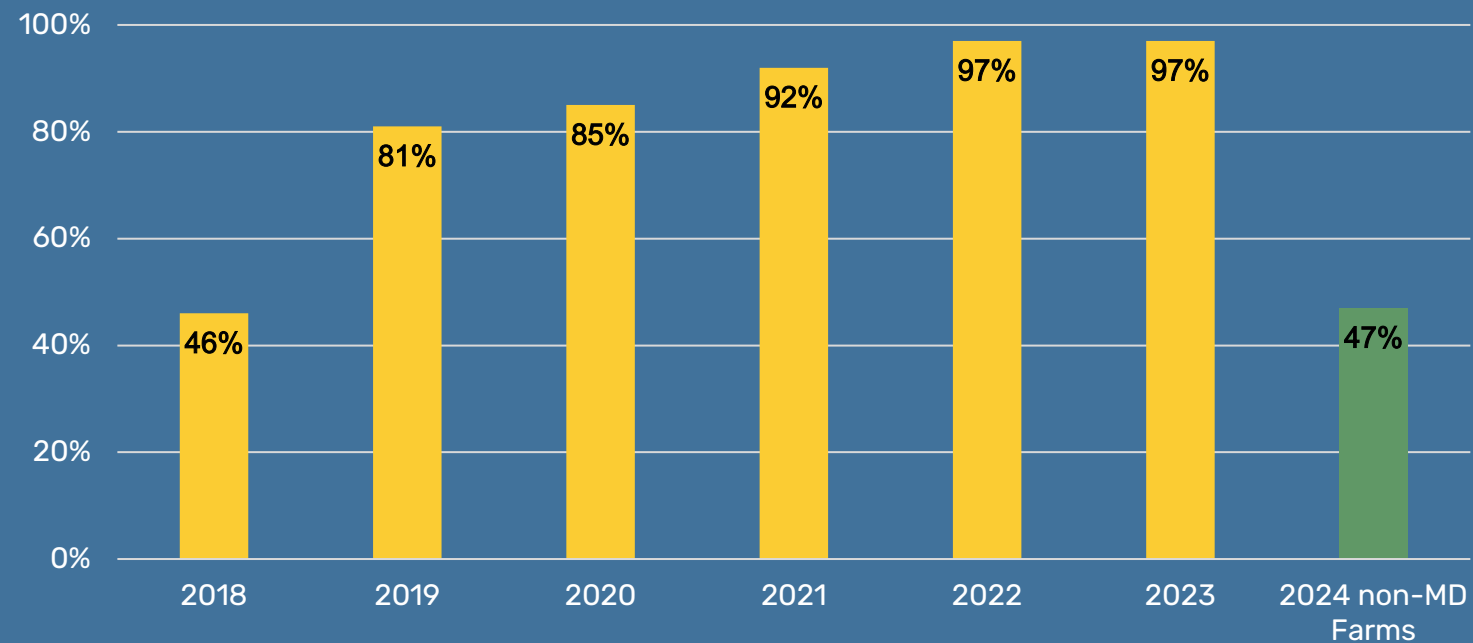


photo credit: John Willis

SPOTLIGHT: CREATING WORKPLACES FREE FROM VIOLENCE

"We need people to see what happens on dairy farms. We want an end to violence against farmworkers."

- Ulda

The threat of violence is pervasive in the dairy industry, spurred by workers' isolation and precarity. Farms are located in remote areas, with workers often dependent on employers for housing and transportation. Many workers on family-run operations are enmeshed in complex or contentious family dynamics. Immigrant workers often face significant language barriers in these negotiations, are unfamiliar of their rights, and are fearful of engaging with law enforcement. These conditions are prime for escalating interpersonal disputes into dangerous physical altercations.

In July, 2024, farmworker Ulver and his 15-year old nephew Josue were beaten bloody by their employer. Ulver recounts:

"He punched me repeatedly until I fell to the ground. He kept hitting me and I wasn't able to defend myself. He kept hitting me and began to choke me. He was holding my throat so tightly that I couldn't breathe. I started to black out. I thought my boss would kill me and I would never see my family again."

Ulver and his family – dependent on their assailant for their livelihood and housing – continue to work on the farm and live in constant fear.

Outside of the Milk with Dignity Program, farmworkers face enormous barriers to seeking recourse for violent crimes. On another farm, a worker was beaten unconscious by her supervisor. When her son, Diego (also a worker on the farm) confronted the supervisor, he attacked the family with a machete. When Diego called the police and the assailant was arrested, the boss blamed him for the loss of her trusted supervisor. He recalls: "The only thing she said was: 'Who's going to milk the cows in the morning?'" Following the attack, Diego and his family were fired and kicked out of their home.

The involvement of law enforcement rarely guarantees farmworker safety. At another non-Milk with Dignity farm, a worker was assaulted by his boss while taking a break during a twelve-hour overnight shift. When a bystander called the police, the boss openly admitted to grabbing the worker, forcing him back to work, and swearing at him to "Get back in the f--- barn." The police took no action and the farm owner faced no consequences for his violent behavior.

Fortunately, on Milk with Dignity farms, a new story is being written. Violence, physical or sexual, is a "zero tolerance" provision in the Code of Conduct, meaning that failure to address instances of violence will result in the farm's immediate suspension from the Program and the loss of the Milk with Dignity Premium. This provision sometimes requires the immediate termination of a violent supervisor or worker, but multiple mechanisms work to de-escalate and interrupt patterns of conflict long before they result in physical violence.

In the Program's annual education sessions, workers and supervisors sit together to learn about their right to a violence-free workplace. These sessions – held simultaneously in English and Spanish – establish clear, mutually-held expectations for behavior on the farm and frequently generate productive conversations about workplace issues which might otherwise have been left to simmer and generate discontent. Annual audits offer another opportunity for farmers and workers to address tensions, with bilingual MDSC staff members present to mediate. Finally, the 24/7 support line means workers always have someone to call, whether they recently experienced violence or they feel uncomfortable with a coworker's attitude and need help de-escalating the situation. These safeguards are essential, especially for women and LGBTQ+ individuals who are at higher risk of physical and sexual violence.

If violence does occur on farm enrolled in the Program, the Standards Council's intimate knowledge of farms and deep relationships with workers allow for the possibility of a restorative, case-by-case approach. For example, when farmworker Antonio was punched on shift by another worker, he immediately called Milk with Dignity's support line. MDSC launched an investigation of the situation, assessing Antonio's immediate physical safety and need for medical care. Within 24 hours, staff had interviewed all workers involved, including witnesses and farm owners, and

created a temporary plan to ensure Antonio would not face retaliation from the other worker.

MDSC facilitated a restorative process to create an appropriate Corrective Action Plan. In this case, Antonio decided he didn't need the assailant to be fired, but he didn't want to work shifts with him anymore. MDSC supported the employers to create a new staffing schedule and ensured a final warning was issued to the assailant, with the understanding that if there was any additional violence, he would immediately lose his job. In the following weeks, investigators followed up with Antonio to ensure he felt comfortable with this arrangement and safe on the farm. Antonio reflects:

"If Milk with Dignity hadn't intervened with the bosses and with the worker, if you guys hadn't been there, I think he would have assaulted me again – hit me physically, or maybe worse. I thought I would have to leave the farm because the bosses favored him and would rather keep him on. If the farm weren't in the Program, I wouldn't have been able to do anything."

Antonio's bleak characterization of outcomes for workers outside of the Program has too often been proven correct. Violence, left unaddressed, often escalates. When workers do attempt to seek recourse, they're as likely to face retaliation for reporting violence as the assailant is to face consequences. For Antonio, the 24-hour worker support line, anti-retaliation provisions, worker-to-worker education, and mandatory corrective action meant he not only got to keep his job, but that he was empowered to be an active collaborator, defining what was needed to feel safe at work. Over time, these interventions begin to shift farm culture, laying the foundation for a dairy industry free from workplace violence.

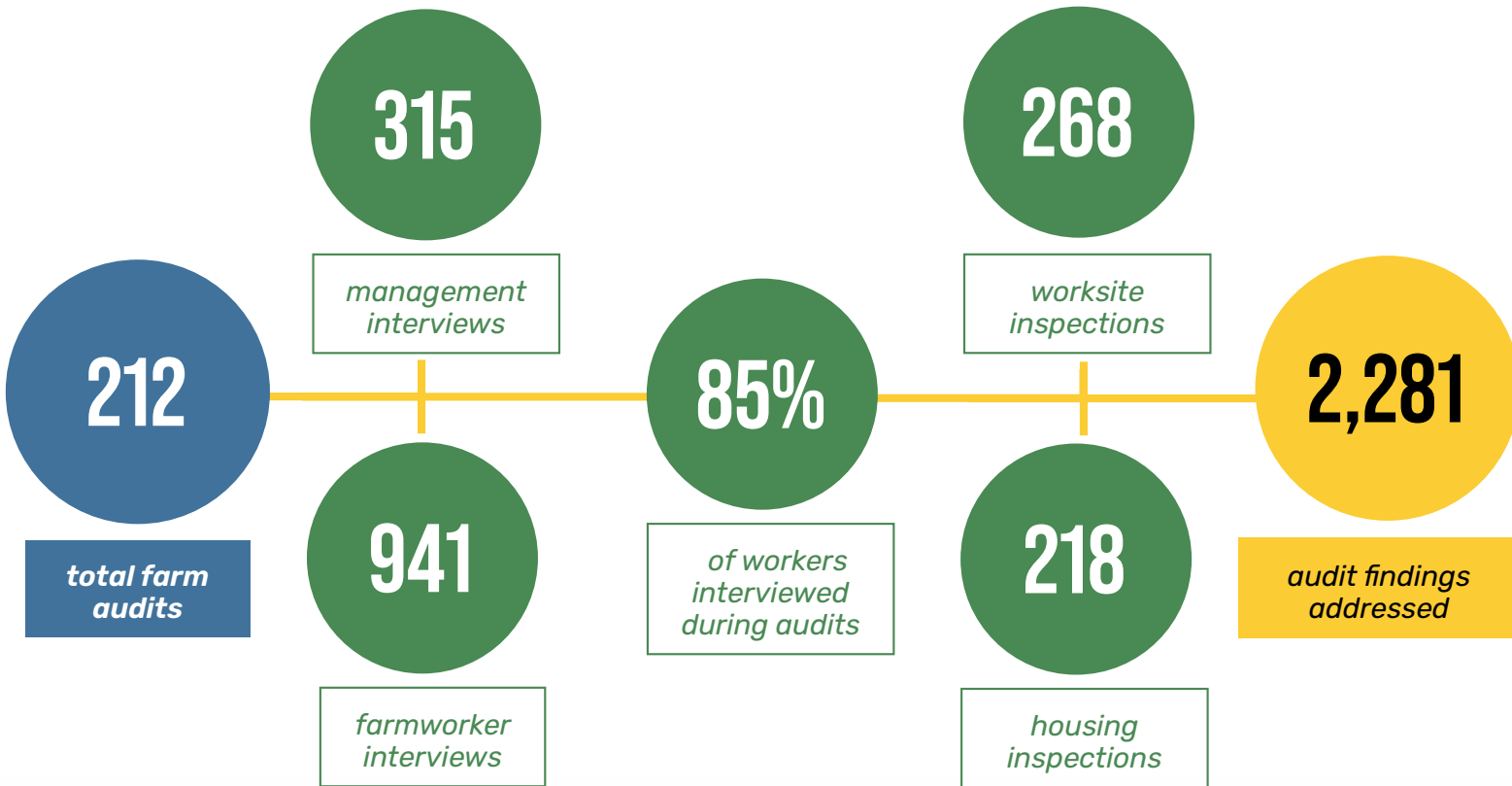
The stakes are high. Josue's mother, Ulda, knows this better than anyone. She was forced to watch, unable to intervene, as her brother-in-law and 15 year-old son were beaten by their boss. Ulda understands the difference that the Milk with Dignity Program could have made for her family. Speaking recently, she had a clear message for dairy companies:

"Don't wait until one of us dies. Join Milk with Dignity now."



photo credit: Vera Chang

FARM AUDITS



SPOTLIGHT: ADDRESSING CHILD LABOR IN THE DAIRY INDUSTRY

The issue of immigrant child labor made headlines this past year, with many states relaxing child labor laws, and a series of exposés from *The New York Times* that precipitated White House executive action. According to the Department of Labor, child labor violations hit a two-decade high in 2023, up 69% from 2018. Reported violations are likely just the tip of the iceberg.

Young migrants navigate enormous economic pressure. Many teenagers have made the difficult decision to abandon their schooling to support their families, and they arrive in the U.S. deeply in debt from the journey. Paco shares his story as a young person immigrating to Vermont:

"I came to this country when I was 14 years old. I came with my father out of necessity and in search of a better life with more opportunities. With my dad, I started working on a dairy farm in Addison County, Vermont. I worked 12 hour shifts milking cows. The conditions were terrible, the machinery was old and broken down, and the housing conditions were awful."

Paco's story is all too common. Laws that determine underage work eligibility in agriculture are riddled with exemptions and loopholes, and even the laws that do exist are rarely enforced. Dairy farms in the U.S. often operate on a "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, allowing teens to take on tasks and shifts that far exceed what's safe or legal for young people.

Milk with Dignity requires full compliance with all child labor laws, and for farms in the Program, the Standards Council is the only entity actively auditing and enforcing compliance. Sometimes, this requires the farm to dismiss underage workers. If child labor is determined to be systemic, the farm is immediately suspended from the Program. When cases are isolated, however, the MDSC engages in more nuanced approaches, with the understanding that simply firing young people can have the unintended consequence of pushing them to work on farms outside of the Program, where they have fewer rights and less support.

When possible, MDSC works with families and farmers to clarify age requirements and explore legal employment options. In Vermont, young people ages 14-16 can work on farms, with restrictions on the hours and type of work they can perform. Coming into compliance with the law may mean shuffling milking schedules so that young people are free to

attend school, or redistributing chores so teenagers are not responsible for handling animals or machinery. These complex negotiations require the deep trust of workers, and open communication with farmers, that only Milk with Dignity has achieved.

Paco explains what it meant to move to a farm that complies with child labor requirements, where he continues to work to this day:

"The farm I went to was just entering into the Milk with Dignity Program. I moved because here the pay is higher and the schedule is lighter. Instead of 12-hour shifts, I started working 4-hour shifts. The housing is much better, I get more time off, paid sick days, and paid vacations."

By moving to a Milk with Dignity farm, Paco benefitted not just from shorter, more age-appropriate shifts, but from all the other rights protected by the Program: healthy housing, less hazardous work sites, minimum wage enforcement, adequate rest, and more.

Young people, especially young immigrants, face heightened risks in the workplace and deserve additional protections. Even though teenagers 16 years and older can legally work in agriculture in Vermont with virtually no restrictions, MDSC makes it a practice to provide additional enforcement attention to farms with young workers. The Program also works to preserve young people's potential to pursue a life outside of the milking parlor. MDSC connects young workers and their families to school districts, enrichment programs, and continuing education organizations. This holistic approach ensures both that child labor law is strictly enforced, and that young people – some of whom are alone and far from home – are brought into a network of advocates and resources rather than pushed further into the shadows. Paco understands the difference this has made for him, as someone who was obligated by economic circumstance to enter the workforce as a young person:

"The treatment here is more respectful because the Program can intervene if there's any abuse or if they violate my rights. Milk with Dignity helps a lot, it benefits all of us. Anything we need, the Program is there to help."



photo credit: John Willis

COMPLAINT INVESTIGATION AND RESOLUTION

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total All Years
Total Support Line Inquiries	106	203	415	371	314	202	1611
Complaints resolved without a finding of Code violation*	5	24	92	82	139	117	459
Complaints with findings of Code violations	36	68	124	101	58	52	439
Code violations uncovered through complaints	76	96	187	127	76	65	627
Code violations resolved through complaints	76	95	178	125	76	61	611
Percentage of code violations resolved through complaints**	100%	99%	95%	98%	100%	94%	97%
Interpretation or referrals	7	56	83	132	91	29	398
Median days to resolution	7	6	2	4	2	4	3.5

*In some instances, farms agree to address a concern or mitigate a potential risk without a definitive finding of a Code violation. In other cases, MDSC's contact with a farm in response to a worker's concern spurs a farm to take proactive steps to comply with the Code, thereby preempting a workers' rights violation before it could take place.

**Nearly 100% of Code violations uncovered through complaints are promptly resolved through the complaint resolution process. Occasionally, violations uncovered through complaints are resolved through Corrective Action Plans stemming from the audit process and are not reflected here. Complaints still unresolved by the end of 2023 will be resolved in 2024 and will be registered in the next Program report.

WORKER EDUCATION

247 Program education sessions

978 worker participants

313 manager and owner participants

SPOTLIGHT: PROACTIVE ENFORCEMENT

The Milk with Dignity Standards Council keeps careful track of the number of calls that are received on the worker support line every year and marks how each of those inquiries is later resolved. In the database, one classification of resolution has consistently grown: "Code violation preempted by Complaint Resolution process." This designation is used when MDSC's direct intervention prevented a violation of workers' rights from taking place. As trust in the Program has grown, workers and farmers more frequently anticipate potential violations of the Code and proactively seek MDSC's support to facilitate a resolution.

Sometimes, these inquiries are straightforward. A farmworker doesn't think the farmer understood his request for a sick day and wants to ensure the shift will be covered and he'll still be paid. A clarifying text to the farmer, a follow-up call to make sure the sick day was paid, and there you have it: a guarantee of the worker's right, without need of a formal complaint. In an industry where less than half of workers receive paid sick leave, this is no small feat.

Other times, these processes are more complex. For example, workers on Milk with Dignity farms have "Just Cause" protections, meaning that terminations must follow certain patterns of escalating discipline that apply uniformly to all employees. This is a major departure from the status quo on most farms, where employers have never before been required to justify disciplining or firing their workers.

In one such case, a farmer recently reached out to MDSC to express their intention to fire a worker for animal mishandling. Because of previous complaint resolutions regarding terminations without just cause, the farmer wanted to ensure that the firing would not violate Milk with Dignity's protections. After an

investigation, MDSC determined the worker had not received sufficient warning. The Standards Council assisted the farmer to draft an official written warning in Spanish and send a reminder to all workers about proper animal handling. The worker kept his job, and – after several rounds of conversations – the farmer recognized that firing this worker would have been an inappropriate escalation.

Seven years of Milk with Dignity mean that employers' and workers' understanding of the Program has meaningfully shifted farm protocols and practices. Farmers refill first aid kits without waiting for a Corrective Action Plan; workers request their holiday pay without seeking the support of the Standards Council; farmers file workers' compensation claims without MDSC's prompting; issues that once required contentious complaint investigations and resolutions can now be handled with a single phone call.

This slow and steady culture shift requires constant attention, reminders, and prompts, but at its core the Program is changing how farmers see workers, and how workers see themselves. Ervin has worked at a Milk with Dignity farm for over six years. He summarizes the shift:

There are still little issues that come up, just like in any workplace, but we feel different now. There's not retaliation anymore. The farmers know the rules now, too; they can't just do whatever they want. Sometimes workers are still scared to speak up, but if they don't, nothing will get better.



photo credit: John Willis

MILK WITH DIGNITY PREMIUM: INVESTMENTS IN FARMWORKER RIGHTS

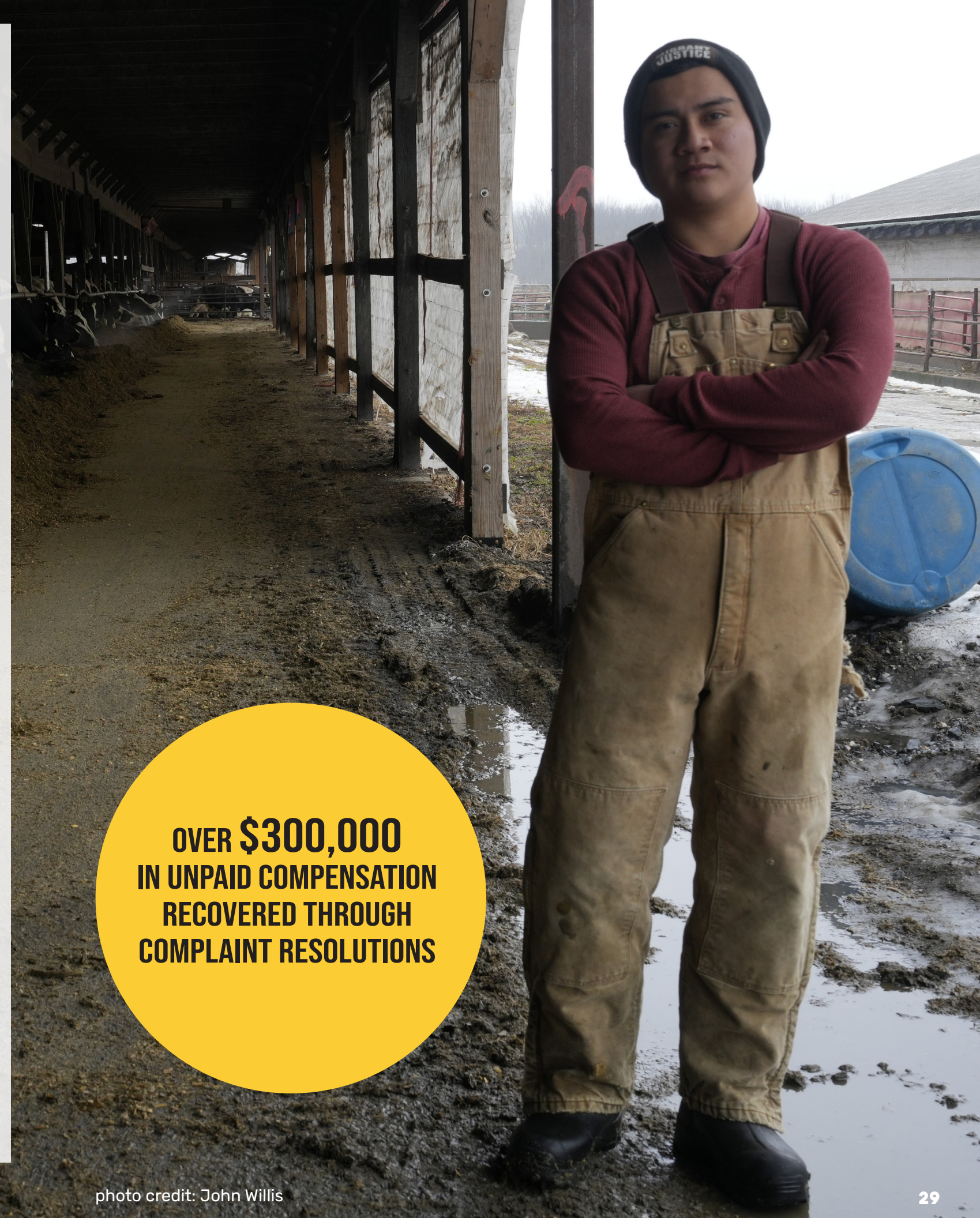
From early 2018 through the end of 2023, using MD Premium payments from Ben & Jerry's, participating farms spent over **\$5.35 million on Code-related improvements**, including:

- Over **\$3.84 million** in raises to meet the state minimum wage
- **\$365,000+** in MD Bonus payments
- **\$65,000+** in paid sick leave on farms that had not been providing it before
- **\$24,000+** in fire safety devices, first aid supplies and personal protective equipment that was not provided before
- **\$600,000+** in major housing improvements, including four new farmworker housing units
- **\$112,000+** in other safety improvements, including paid safety training, ergonomic equipment to reduce repetitive strain, and structural improvements to reduce electrical and slip and fall hazards
- **\$365,000+** in paid vacation, holidays, and more

Plus additional premium funds retained by farms as economic relief

Milk with Dignity has leveraged an **additional \$1.2 million** beyond the Program's Premium to finance construction of **new farmworker housing**.

**OVER \$300,000
IN UNPAID COMPENSATION
RECOVERED THROUGH
COMPLAINT RESOLUTIONS**



“WE HAVE ROOM TO BREATHE”

Walo was 15 years old when he first arrived in the United States. He worked 84 hours a week at a farm in New York, sometimes 90. “You just worked and slept. If you were sick, you worked sick. There wasn’t time for anything.” Walo slept in three to four hour chunks. There were no vacation days or sick leave, just work.

Working like that, you lose out on so many things because you never leave the farm. You don’t even have time to go to the store. You’re working more, but you end up losing money because you have to pay someone to bring you food and run your errands.

Conditions improved slightly when Walo moved to Vermont, but it wasn’t until his farm joined the Milk with Dignity Program that he was able to build a life outside of the milking parlor. The farm hired additional milkers to meet the Code of Conduct’s rest requirement, which mandates that every worker has access to at

least one day off a week and eight consecutive hours of rest each day (since increased to ten consecutive hours). Suddenly, instead of 72 hours or more a week, Walo was working 60 hours and was able to align his day off with his wife’s schedule.

On our days off we like to go out with our son Walín. Now that we have licenses and cars, we can go to the store. We still spend a bit of money, but we have fun. And we get to see things. We can go out to dinner as a family, go to the movies, or our son’s baseball games.

The Program’s rest requirements created entirely new opportunities for Walo’s family to share time together. These new opportunities, however, are attributable to more than just the additional time off. Rather, Walo reports that the work pace has relaxed thanks to appropriate staffing levels and improved relationships with farm owners:

There’s more trust between us. I think they value our work more. There’s less pressure from above, so now we have room to breathe. We can take little breaks when we need to. The work isn’t as draining, because now three people do what two people used to do.

Walo now finishes his work days with more energy, ready to use time off to the fullest. His son Walín likes it when his dad practices baseball with him or sits in the stands as he plays on the school team. Other evenings, the son is the spectator at his dad’s games.

Walo is the captain of his farm’s soccer team. At workers’ request, farm owners recently mowed an expanded practice pitch nestled between hay fields. As Walo shared his experiences with the Milk with Dignity Program for this report, he was multitasking, painting sidelines in preparation for the evening’s match. Walo’s farm regularly hosts scrimmages against neighboring farm teams, and community members gather to share food and watch.

Each year, Walo’s team competes in the annual Migrant Justice soccer tournament. Since almost the entire farm staff takes the day off to compete, the farm owners cover the milking shifts themselves. Walo’s team recently bested more than a dozen other farmworker teams from around the region, taking home the trophy and bragging rights.

Life on the farm isn’t perfect. Wages hover around the state-mandated minimum. Milking is hard work, any way you cut it, and disagreements between workers emerge from time to time. But, line paint in hand, Walo emphasizes the way the culture of the farm itself has shifted, as well as his sense of agency:

[The Milk with Dignity Program] has really opened my mind. If I need something at work, it’s only a matter of using my voice and asking for it. When we need to go to Walín’s school for something, we just let the bosses know the day and they cover us. If the bosses have an issue, they speak about it with us one on one, and they don’t get mad the way they used to.

Walo’s examples correlate with specific provisions of the Program’s Code of Conduct. The Code requires that employees be provided with all necessary supplies and equipment for their jobs, and that farms respond promptly to restocking requests. Another Code provision stipulates that workers have access to unpaid time off to meet their basic needs, like attending a school meeting. A third provision requires supervisors to provide clear, proportional, and consistent progressive discipline when issues do arise. Even the hosting of soccer scrimmages is protected through the right to receive visitors in farmworkers’ housing. Taken together, the more than 65 interlocking provisions of the Code of Conduct strengthen workers’ sense of mutual respect and agency – and expand workers’ confidence in advocating for additional benefits, like a new soccer field.

Walo’s son is now 11, not so much younger than Walo himself when he came to the United States. Thanks to the Milk with Dignity Program, Walín is growing up in a world Walo could only have imagined. This year, the Program’s mandated five days of paid vacation allowed the family to travel to Six Flags together, where Walín went on his first roller coaster. At the end of summer,

the family takes a day to attend the Champlain Valley Fair, and this winter, Walín is excited to learn how to snowboard. “There’s a lot to do, and the days go by quickly.”

Our conversation with Walo wrapped up as his soccer teammates began to arrive. His final reflections were about dairy companies and consumers.

“[Milk with Dignity] needs to expand, because I know people who still really suffer at work. My brother and cousin work outside of the Program. Everyone should have the benefits that we have, because it’s good to work. But it’s also good to rest.”

photo credit: Terry Allen



Walo and coworkers celebrate after their team wins the annual Migrant Justice soccer tournament.

photo credit: Migrant Justice



Walo and his son Walín at the farm’s new soccer field.



MILK WITH DIGNITY

**A NEW DAY FOR
HUMAN RIGHTS IN DAIRY**