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| *Title:* Public Health Approaches to Guestworker Safety and Health in Louisiana: Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic |
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| *Objectives:* Describe LA’s reliance on the guestworker program; Understand mechanisms of enforcement and protection regarding the H-2B visa program; Describe how COVID-19 exacerbated problems within the H-2B visa program; Describe 4 ways public health may play a role in protecting vulnerable worker populations |
| *Background:* The H-2 Guestworker program provides foreign, unskilled, temporary labor; The H-2B guestworker program specifically provides labor in non-agricultural industries such as seafood processing plants. Labor abuses have been consistently documented under these programs with reports of wage theft, verbal abuse and harassment, coercion, sexual harassment, unsanitary living conditions, and hazardous or unsafe working conditions. Guestworkers play an integral role in the American economy so much so that they were deemed “essential” during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this, the disregard for workers’ health and safety coupled with the lack of enforcement and oversight common to the program led to large outbreaks of COVID-19 in seafood processing plants across Louisiana. Gaps in oversight, protection, and enforcement are part of the long-lived narrative of these programs but the true magnitude of the problems with guestworker programs are unknown due to limited data as workers fear retaliation from reporting labor abuse. The COVID-19 pandemic shed light on the structural problems of the H-2 programs that contribute to the exploitation and endangerment of guestworkers’ health and safety.  |
| *Case Description:* In Louisiana, more than 100 workers at three Louisiana crawfish farms developed symptoms of COVID-19. Two Whistleblower accounts were filed that depict dangerous working and living conditions and the employer’s disregard of CDC and OSHA recommended public health measures. Guestworkers at these plants reported blatant violations of social distancing protocols, inadequate testing capacity, no provisions for medical consolation or treatment, and retaliations against worker when violations were reported.  |
| *Conclusion:* Although the COVID-19 pandemic was unprecedented, the exploitation of guestworkers in food processing industries has been long-documented. Cases of labor abuse, trafficking, and worker exploitation have consistently been reported in these working populations and have been brought to light with these recent outbreaks. Public health has a role to play in protecting vulnerable worker populations. Some strategies include implementing more comprehensive and timely data collection processes and engaging with local worker centers and labor advocates. Likewise, public health has a responsibility and opportunity to make an impact on a larger scale by promoting laws and policies that incorporate fair labor practices and by advocating for strategies that promote workers' rights in our increasingly globalized economy. |