

Five migrant farm workers have died since mid-March, four while in COVID-19 quarantine, advocacy group says

TAVIA GRANT > AND IAN BAILEY >

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Temporary farmworkers leave behind their work boots and rain coats at Schuyler Farms near Simcoe, Ont.

FRED LUM/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Five migrant farm workers have died in Canada since mid-March, four while they were in quarantine, a migrant rights group says.

The deaths raise questions about whether health care providers were regularly checking in with the workers while they were in quarantine, and whether workers were able to access help, said Syed Hussan, executive director of Migrant Workers Alliance for Change. MWAC, an organization comprised of migrant workers and advocates, is calling for an immediate investigation into the deaths.

“People are dying. And this is quite disconcerting – we don’t know what happened.”

Ontario’s migrant farm workers at higher risk of COVID-19 and need better protections: report

A coroner’s report in Ontario last week called for better protections for migrant workers; it made 35 recommendations to improve their living and working conditions, among them ensuring that quarantine sites meet public-health standards and that workers have knowledge about how to access the health care system.

That report, by the province’s deputy chief coroner, was based on investigations into the COVID-19 deaths in southwestern Ontario of three Mexican farm workers who died last year.

In March, federal Auditor-General Karen Hogan said that her team came across “significant shortcomings” with Canada’s temporary foreign worker program and raised these with the government in February. She said they found that the federal government didn’t follow inspection protocols and thus couldn’t show whether workers were properly quarantined.

The Globe and Mail confirmed several of the recent deaths, though not how they died.

The workers were from Jamaica, Mexico and St. Vincent; four of them died while in their 14-day quarantine before starting their seasonal work in Canada’s agriculture sector, and the cause of the deaths is still unknown, according to MWAC.

They were, MWAC says: Logan Grant, from Jamaica, who died on March 13; Roberto Jacob Baca Gomez, from Mexico, who died March 22; Jose Antonio Coronado, also from Mexico, who died April 23; and Romario Morgan, of St. Vincent, who died April 29. In addition, one unnamed worker, from Jamaica, died on Friday in a hospital, the group said.

A GoFundMe page for Mr. Coronado lists him as 42, and said he was the sole financial support for his family of eight in Mexico.

“He was a lovely man,” said Elaine MacNeil, one of the organizers of the fundraiser page who volunteers to support Mexican farm workers in the Port Elgin, Ont., area.

The page said he died in Port Elgin of natural causes “unrelated to COVID-19.” He was the father of a nine-year-old son named Brandon, Ms. MacNeil said.

More than a thousand farm workers contracted COVID-19 while in Canada last year, heightening calls for better work and health protections for migrant farm workers, who typically enter the country under the seasonal agricultural worker program.

Federal Immigration Minister Marco Mendicino expressed regret Wednesday over the deaths of the migrant farm workers.

“It concerns me profoundly,” he said at a news conference on another issue.

“There are some very painful lessons to be learned, including from the migrant workers community. This is an ongoing challenge and I am certainly committed ... to continuing to work for advocates for migrant workers as well as migrant workers themselves.”

Mr. Mendicino said the government acknowledges the reality that workers, on arrival in Canada, need PPE and testing and tracing, and government needs “to think forward towards a vaccination strategy” built on the advice of health care experts.

He didn’t say whether Ottawa is investigating the deaths. The federal government manages the temporary foreign worker program, and issues rules on the quarantine period; Mr. Mendicino noted that the provincial governments have primary responsibility for health and safety standards.

Among the deaths are Mr. Grant, 57, who died in Ontario. He was in his 24th season as a farm worker, the Jamaica Observer reported. In an e-mail to The Globe, Olaf Fontenelle, head of the Eastern Caribbean Liaison Service, confirmed the death of Mr. Morgan, on April 29, and said the cause of death has not yet been determined. The Consulate General of Mexico said it is aware of one case of a Mexican national who has died.

MWAC also called for compensation for the families of the deceased workers, and said migrant workers need permanent resident status to protect themselves.

With reports from Stephanie Chambers and Laura Stone in Toronto, and James Keller in Calgary

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351 King Street East, Suite 1600, Toronto, ON Canada, M5A 0N1

Phillip Crawley, Publisher