

Meredith Bruskin
Swanville
LD 1483

Dear Members of the Labor and Housing Committee,

I am writing to support the efforts being made by 3 current bills before you, to finally give farmworkers in the State of Maine the same rights as other workers: LD 398 to phase in overtime and wage laws over the next three years; LD 525 to give farmworkers the right to organize so that they have a chance to experience safe working conditions, humane housing, and the ability to be paid a fair wage; and finally LD 1483 An Act to Protect the Rights of Agricultural workers. As a Nurse Practitioner, I have cared for farmworkers who have gone to work sick, afraid they would lose their job if they did not. With Covid, we know how dangerous (and expensive) this choice can be.

We are all aware that the "status quo" means farmworkers are not even afforded the guarantee of a minimum wage, and certainly not a livable wage, for essential work for our State and the economy; that they are sometimes required to work 6-7 d a week, often with a day off every 2 weeks, and the work is a 365 day a year job; many farmworkers find themselves working for employers who " house" them--with rents charged-- in subsistence conditions and if they are sick or injured, there is no guarantee of pay for time off. These conditions have existed since people were legally enslaved in this country and then continued in the interest of keeping a work force with no rights ie " cheap and dependent " labor, from Jim Crow time on--we must right this wrong. It is your great opportunity and I believe your duty, to begin correcting this unequal and discriminatory practice. These are people just like you and I , who deserve to be treated with dignity, who are struggling to feed and house their families, who are the backbone of our economy, indeed our lives. They feed us. Given inflation, Farm wages have actually DECREASED since 2012. If paid a living wage with overtime for extra hours worked, farmworkers would be happy to come to Maine, and the cost for this is estimated to be only 9 % increase in farm income. Seventeen others states have already enacted similar laws--let Maine join them! Thank you for your attention to this very important issue.