

Dane County Farmworker Housing Planning Project

Engagement Summary for Housing Opportunities Lab #1

Purpose

This document summarizes findings from engagement with farmworkers, farm owners, and local land use decision makers in Dane County as well as agricultural support organizations that serve farmworkers and farm owners in Dane County.

This engagement focused on understanding current housing conditions, unmet needs, challenges, opportunities, and desired housing attributes. This synthesis of findings will serve as the foundation for drafting relevant and grounded housing plan recommendations. This summary was synthesized from the nINA Collective's and Sift Consulting's engagement summaries.

Context

Farmworker housing challenges in Dane County exist within a broader and longstanding shortage of overall affordable rural housing. Farmworker housing demand is growing, yet both on-farm and off-farm solutions face regulatory, political, and market barriers that currently limit what can be built or rehabilitated.

Additionally, there is a tension of translating farmworker housing needs into parcel-specific housing recommendations during a time of heightened fear and threats to safety due to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

This climate of fear has led to challenges in recruiting interview and focus group participants throughout this project.

Engagement Snapshot

Farmworker Virtual Interviews and Focus Groups by the nINA Collective

- Participants primarily employed in dairy operations across Dane County
- 3 focus groups
- 8 individual interviews (30 minutes each)
- 16 total voices
- 9 out of 10 sessions conducted in Spanish. One focus group conducted in English.

Farm Owner, Ag Support Organization, and Local Land-use Decision Maker Interviews by Sift Consulting

- Virtual and in-person 1:1 interviews
- 5 interviews with farm owners (4 dairy, one veg); all hired labor; 4 provided housing
- 7 interviews with organizations who serve dairy farmers including membership groups, technical support providers, personnel service providers, and program managers
- 5 interviews with land-use decision makers

Farm Owner Electronic Survey developed and distributed by Sift Consulting

- Anonymous survey distributed via postcard to 175 farm owners (including 165 milk producers) and via email to 75 farm listservs and groups across agricultural sectors
- 21 responses from farm owners in Dane County; results used qualitatively to complement interview findings

In the coming month, additional interviews and focus groups will be completed.

Themes and Findings

FW | Farmworker

FO | Farm Owner

SO | Ag Support Org

P/Z | Planner/Zoning

Workers are drawn to Dane County through social networks and the promise of stability.

FW

- Workers described multiple pathways into agricultural work and into Dane County specifically. Family and social networks played a significant role, with several workers noting that relatives or friends helped connect them to jobs and housing.
- Stability was frequently cited as a motivating factor. Workers contrasted year-round dairy work in Dane County with more temporary or unstable agricultural employment in other states.
- Some noted that wages and cost of living initially felt more manageable compared to other regions, though rising costs have reduced this advantage over time.
- A smaller number of workers expressed personal affinity for farm work itself, citing enjoyment of working outdoors or with animals. Others described their work primarily as a means to meet financial goals, including sending money to family members or building homes in their countries of origin.

"I liked the job so I stayed, I think its very nice, very friendly and it's good pay with good hours."

Housing is predominantly employer-provided and closely tied to employment.

FW

- Workers reported living in employer-provided housing located on or near the farms where they work. Housing types included single-family homes, trailers, and shared houses. Independent rental arrangements in towns or cities were less common and described as exceptions rather than the norm.
- Overcrowding was widely reported. Workers described situations in which six to seven people shared a single bathroom and kitchen, with some reporting extreme cases of more than a dozen people living in one house. Privacy was limited, particularly for families and workers on different shifts. Housing costs and arrangements varied.
- Some workers paid no rent but emphasized that housing was directly tied to employment. Others paid partial rent, typically ranging from \$400 to \$600 per month, sometimes with employer subsidies.
- Multiple focus group workers explicitly stated that losing their job means losing their housing, creating significant vulnerability. One worker noted having to be "really careful" about workplace relationships because of this dependency.

Housing conditions and arrangements are often precarious, substandard, and mismatched to worker needs.

FW FO SO P/Z

- Current farmworker housing includes aging farmhouses, trailers, mobile home parks, apartments, and shared units.
- Much of this housing stock is aging, substandard, and poorly maintained. Reported issues included inadequate heating, broken windows, leaking roofs or trailers, malfunctioning appliances, and delayed or refused repairs.
- In some cases, workers reported paying out-of-pocket for repairs despite not owning the property. Internet access was also identified as a challenge, particularly in rural areas. Workers described difficulties obtaining service due to previous tenants' unpaid bills or requirements to provide documentation that caused discomfort or fear.
- Transportation and long commutes further compound housing stress, especially where off-farm options are limited or unaffordable.

"My room is very cold, the windows are old and do not keep the air out. There is no heat, I use a space heater."

Housing challenges are largely consistent across workers and farms.

FW FO SO

- Workers generally reported that their coworkers lived in similar housing conditions. Shared housing, limited privacy, and aging structures were described as common across farms. While some variation existed—such as differences between on-farm and off-farm housing or between employers—the overall picture described by workers was one of widespread consistency in housing challenges.
- Farm owners reported a 'patchwork' approach of farmworker housing, i.e. they and neighboring farm owners provided housing to some workers, but not all. Housing provided was a mix of on-farm buildings, nearby trailers and farmhouses, and rented units.



The housing need is real, widespread, and growing, but it is not uniform nor quantitatively known.

FO SO P/Z

- Housing challenges vary significantly by farm size, type (e.g., dairy vs. vegetable), seasonality, and proximity to available housing.
- Dairy operations typically require year-round housing, while vegetable farms have more seasonal and fluctuating needs.
- Because of the shadow existence of many farmworkers, the mistrust of government agencies common among farm owners, and the lack of cohesive data sources, much of the need for farmworker housing is anecdotal, challenging to quantify accurately, and difficult to geographically place within the County.
- This is further exacerbated by the fact that farmworkers often live in informal, overcrowded, or temporary arrangements that are largely invisible to traditional data sources.

Zoning and land-use regulations are core barriers to farmworker housing development.

FO SO P/Z

- Zoning restrictions and unclear/antiquated/inconsistent code interpretation are obstacles to both new construction and rehabilitation.
- Additionally general opposition to housing development was repeatedly shared as a barrier. NIMBY sentiments and concerns about new programs being taken advantage of are common.
- Desired solutions, such as small on-farm units, modular or prefab housing, and clustered on-farm housing, often conflict with existing ordinances.

“Need zoning changes for this to become a reality.”

The cost of construction, repairs, and maintenance deter farm owner investment in farmworker housing.

FO

- The cost of construction, repairs, and maintenance is a primary challenge for farm owner investment in farmworker housing.
- These challenges are exacerbated by communication challenges between farm owners and employees, concerns about spaces being taken care of and maintained, farmworkers feeling unable to report issues due to power dynamics, and a lack of resources to create shared understanding about responsibilities for both parties.
- Additionally, farm owners can feel overwhelmed by the legal and HR requirements and ramifications of providing housing.

“I am an expert in dairy farming. I am not a housing expert.”

Farm owners understand and agree that appropriate and available housing is a workforce strategy.

FO SO

- Farm owners understand that providing housing encourages employee recruitment, retention, and stability.
- Farm labor is a priority for farm owners and housing is a primary concern for their employees. In general, farm owners are very supportive of farmworker housing and view the challenges as a systems problem, not an individual-farm problem.
- While supportive, housing is also not the most pressing concern for many Dane County farm owners who may be more concerned about the development of data centers, water quality, and other pressing issues.

"If we don't have farmworkers, we don't have farms. If we don't have farms, we don't have food."

There is no single "right" housing model and strong differences of opinion exist about responsibility.

FO SO

- Some farm owners are willing to provide housing but need financial and/or regulatory support.
- Others strongly prefer off-farm, community-based housing so they are not acting as property managers.

"I don't want to take on the responsibility of housing workers. No other industry has to do this. I just want affordable housing options available to my workers that are less than 30 minutes from the farm."

Overcrowding, fear of retaliation, and rising costs remain persistent challenges.

FW

- Despite some benefits, workers consistently described unmet needs related to privacy, safety, and stability. Overcrowding and lack of personal space were recurring concerns, particularly for workers with families or children.
- Workers also described fear and hesitation around reporting housing issues. Some expressed concern about retaliation from employers or landlords, including the possibility of job or housing loss. This fear influenced decisions about speaking up, hosting visitors, or participating in community activities.
- In addition, rising costs of rent, food, and utilities were noted as increasing financial strain, especially for those attempting to rent independently.
- Long commutes from urban areas were described as an added burden when affordable rural housing was unavailable.

Workers aspire to independent, family-appropriate housing separated from employment.

FW

- When asked to imagine safe and affordable housing five years into the future, workers consistently emphasized privacy and independence. Many described a desire for their own homes or apartments without roommates.
- Separation between housing and employment was a central theme. Workers described feeling constrained in their job choices because housing was tied to their employer. Independent housing was associated with greater stability, flexibility, and peace of mind.
- Family-appropriate housing was also emphasized. Workers described the need for multi-bedroom units, clean air, reliable utilities, and environments where children could live comfortably.
- Several workers expressed interest in community-based or clustered housing models that balance private living space with shared areas for social connection.

"I would like to be able to have my own home. No roommates. I would feel like it would help me find my goals and invest in my own land."

Workers emphasize comfort, stability, and freedom from fear.

FW

- Workers repeatedly returned to a desire for basic comfort and dignity. Requests were often framed simply: a safe, clean place to live, with adequate space, heat, and privacy.
- Many workers emphasized the importance of reducing fear—fear of retaliation, fear related to immigration enforcement, and fear of losing housing. Stability and safety were described as prerequisites for long-term planning, family wellbeing, and community connection.

Housing is deeply interconnected with broader systems.

FW FO SO P/Z

- Housing is deeply interconnected with broader systems of transportation, farm viability, community acceptance, infrastructure, and farmworker wages/salary.
- Access to transportation is an essential consideration if housing is located farther from farms.

Optional Reading to Dig Deeper

- ["Officials Approve \\$8 Million for Housing for Immigrant Dairy Workers in Wisconsin. Sheriff's Office Will Try to Close Language Gaps."](#) *ProPublica*, 10 November 2023.
- [Dairy Workers Study: Legal and Community Assessment. University of Wisconsin–Madison School for Workers, April 2023](#)