

# Opinion

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## Cesar Chavez Day March 30

On March 30, workers employed by the State of California will observe a paid holiday in honor of late farm worker leader Cesar Chavez (1927-1993). But as state employees honor the legacy of a great man, the message must also be sent that the fight for farm worker health care access continues. On Cesar Chavez Day, California's farm laborers will still report for work, as will the staff of Golden Valley Health Centers and other health professionals who have dedicated themselves to meeting the health needs of the underserved.

Chavez is perhaps best known for having founded and led the United Farm Workers of America, the nation's first successful labor union for farm workers. A man who held great respect for human dignity, as well as a personal commitment to social justice and non-violence, Chavez rallied California's rural workers in an historic five-year strike/boycott against the grape growing industry. The world-wide boycott ultimately resulted in the 1975 Agricultural Labor Relations Act, and drew national attention to the plight of California's farm workers.

His efforts did not stop there, however, and those who embrace his mission have carried on diligently after his untimely death at the age of 66. And while there has been some evidence of continued progress within the State legislature with regard to farm worker health and safety issues, a recent study by the California Institute for Rural Studies suggests that much work remains to be done. In fact this sobering report, "Suffering in Silence" (2000), indicates that the very group who toil to put healthy food on the nation's tables are suffering from perhaps the poorest health and well-being of any other worker group in the country. "Suffering in Silence" reports that farm workers suffer from major health problems such as high cholesterol, high blood pressure, obesity, anemia and excessive dental problems. Particularly disturbing is the fact that the majority of participants were young males, median age of 34, who are typically expected to be

in peak physical condition.

According to the report, "nearly one in five subjects had at least two of three risk factors for deadly disease such as heart disease, stroke, asthma and diabetes." Both males and female subjects demonstrated an alarmingly increased incident of high blood pressure, unhealthful weight and poor nutrition.

Dental health problems were staggering, with more than one-third of male subjects and nearly 40% of female subjects having at least one broken, decayed or missing tooth. Almost half of the subjects reported that they had never been to a dentist in their lives.

"Suffering in Silence" also probed into health care access among farm workers, declaring that no group of workers faces greater barrier to health care. Even though the work of Cesar Chavez and others has led to better working conditions and additional health initiatives for farm workers, nearly 70% of participants had no form of health insurance, and only 7% participated in any of the government funded programs intended to serve low-income persons. In addition, of the mere 16.5% whose employers did offer health insurance, nearly one-third of these workers did not participate in the plan that were available. The primary reason was inability to afford premiums or co-payments.

Federally-funded community health centers such as Golden Valley Health Centers exist to provide health care services to all persons regardless of health insurance status or ability to pay, with services targeted toward the underserved such as low-income, farm workers and homeless persons. At Golden Valley health Centers we continue to work diligently to overcome cultural and financial barriers to health care by speaking our patients language and keeping our door open to anyone in need.

Last year, Golden Valley health Centers served 50,000 people at our 14 clinical sites in Merced and Stanislaus Counties. Included in this number were nearly 15,000 farm workers and a total of 12,000 patients who had no health insurance and who otherwise would have been unable to access quality and cost effective primary care and preventive health services.

In recognition of Cesar Chavez Day, Golden Valley Health Centers will hold special events at the clinic level, with a special emphasis on dental health in a effort to expand our reach a month community's farm worker. Throughout the day, all of our sites will offer free dental supplies, dental health education, prenatal counseling and coupons for free dental services.

Even with the progress that has been made in the State legislature, we must ask ourselves why these workers continue to suffer in silence, and why their health care needs remain greatly unmet. To me it seem bitterly ironic that the very workers who carry the burden of California's ag industry, which supplies the majority of our nations' demand for healthful fruits and vegetables, are suffering from poor health and nutrition.

Perhaps nobody is more disturbed by the results of "Suffering in Silence: that those of us in the health care profession who are working to provide quality care to farm workers and other low income groups. That is why, as Californians remember Cesar Chavez on March 30, we ask for the support of the community and our legislators in making critically necessary in improving health care access to farm workers.

Hopefully, our legislators in Sacramento will remain as diligent in providing necessary health resources to combat farm worker disease as they were in granting a State holiday.

Alicia Dicochea, Chairperson  
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