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Ventura County panel OKs process to bridge farmworkers' disputes with growers



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A panel of grower and labor interests has agreed on a process for resolving farmworkers' complaints about working conditions, a key part of the committee's assignment to address employment and trust issues in Ventura County's agricultural industry.

"It took a lot of open discussion on both sides," said Rosa Gonzalez, the county staffer who is facilitating meetings of the eight-member advisory group.

Authorized by the Ventura County Board of Supervisors, the committee is charged with recommending how to create what's being called a Farmworker Resource Program. The idea was controversial from the start, dividing the board, opposed by growers as unnecessary and hailed by labor interests.

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But nearly a year after its first meeting, the group has agreed on a mediated process for reaching resolutions on many types of issues. The issues could include health and safety matters such as restroom cleanliness, proper wage payments and sexual harassment, but not allegations of sexual assault that should be reported to police.

The panel also has recommended the program be housed at the Ventura County Human Services Agency. It is expected to primarily be at the agency's office at 1400 Vanguard Drive in Oxnard and perhaps kick off by early next year.

"This is supposed to be a safe-haven type environment," said Human Services Director Barry Zimmerman.

Labor interests supported the idea as a way to reach agreement locally and expeditiously, overcome the fear of workers worried they will be fired if they complain to their employers and avoid the need to approach state and federal agencies when possible.

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“The hope is we can create something better than the current process, which isn’t really working well for anyone,” said Lucas Zucker, a panel co-chairman and advocate for workers.

Zucker, policy director for Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy, said the current process is cumbersome.

It’s difficult for farmworkers to approach a state agency that may be located far from their homes, he said.

“This is a little bit more accessible, gives workers help in navigating the system, learning about their existing rights and understanding the options of going the legal route or directly resolving something with their employers,” he said.

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Co-Chairwoman Ellen Brokaw, one of the grower members on the panel, said the staff in the resource program would present the local mediation process as an option. Currently, she said, workers complain to their employers, say nothing and work with bad morale, or approach a government agency.

The major organizations representing growers opposed the program when it was established by county supervisors in a 3-2 vote in June 2017. Opponents said the \$200,000 in public dollars dedicated to the effort could be put to better use, they had too little notice and that it was not appropriate for the county government to take on the responsibility of advocating for farmworkers.

Brokaw, though, said she is hopeful growers will participate in the voluntary mediation process.

“It may be slow getting underway,” said the CEO of Brokaw Ranch Co. in Santa Paula. “To make this voluntary process work, they have to be convinced that it is not risky and have some ability to trust. That is true with any kind of mediation process.”

LABOR: Union workers rally against Supreme Court ruling on dues

The goals for the resource program include building trust and relationships with farmworkers, helping them navigate public agencies and resolve workplace issues, promoting the reputation of the agricultural industry in Ventura County, attracting farmworkers to the county as a first-choice destination and helping them learn about labor laws.

Still pending are approval of a final budget and the job classifications of the employees assigned to the program. The backgrounds of those individuals will be a major factor in the success of the local mediation process, said Rob Roy, president of the Ventura County Agricultural Association, a 200-member trade group representing growers, packers, shippers and contractors.

“It comes down to who they hire and the skills and experience they have to mediate or resolve these issues,” he said.

The panel meets again Aug. 13 and is expected to make its recommendations for the farmworker resource program to the Board of Supervisors in September.

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