

HEALTH AND SAFETY

HARVEST OF JUSTICE 2022: CHILD LABOR IN AGRICULTURE



Photo Credit: United Farm Workers of America

Children's bodies and brains are still developing, so they are particularly vulnerable to the harmful effects of child labor. The main concerns to their health include exposure to pesticides, heat-related illnesses, violent contact with animals or other humans, the use of sharp tools, heavy machinery, and dangerous transportation vehicles, such as tractors and ATV/UTVs. Agriculture is the most dangerous sector U.S. children are allowed to work in. The fatality rate is 4x higher than other sectors. A Child working in agriculture dies about every three days. And 33 children are injured every day.

One of these children was Maria Isavel Vasquez Jimenez who was only 17 when she died on May 14, 2008, of heat-related illness. She was working in the grape vineyards with her fiancé. It was only her third day working after immigrating from Oaxaca, Mexico.

Maria Isavel was working for a farm labor contractor in Stockton, CA intending to send the money back to her family. She went to work at 6:00 a.m., but none of the workers were provided water until 10:30 a.m. The workers had no access to shade. At 3:40 p.m., Maria Isavel passed out in her fiancé's arms. No workers had training on heat-related illnesses, even though California law requires it. The foreman instructed Maria Isavel to be placed in the hot work van, but the only medical care she received was rubbing alcohol. She wasn't taken to receive immediate medical care because she had to wait for her crew to finish as other workers used the same van.

Maria looked so sick, that the van driver knew she needed to go to a clinic. The foreman told the driver, “Don’t say she was working [for the contractor]. Say she became sick [while] jogging to get exercise. Since she’s underage, it will create big problems for us.”

Maria’s temperature was dangerously high, so she was taken by ambulance to the hospital from the clinic. Over two days, her good heart stopped six times. The last time, doctors were not able to revive her. The doctors learned Maria Isavel was pregnant.

If Maria Isavel had been given early medical care, her death would have been prevented. If her supervisors would have followed heat stress protections mandated in California, her death would have been prevented. Farm workers, especially children, must have protection from heat-related illnesses.

Reflection Questions:

- What could have protected Maria Isavel from heat trauma and how could she have been treated to prevent her death?
- What kinds of work and working conditions are acceptable for child workers?
- Why is just having health and safety rules on the books not enough?

Prayer:

For the vulnerability of farm worker children's bodies and brains when they are exposed to extreme temperatures, pesticides and the challenging physical requirements of farm work, we pray to the Lord. Lord, hear our prayer.

Act!

Youth are more vulnerable to heat-related illnesses.

Support the “Asuncion Valdivia Heat Illness and Fatality Prevention Act” which requires the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to implement a national heat stress standard.

Learn more

Citations and links to additional resources at bit.ly/hoj2022

About Us

National Farm Worker Ministry educates and mobilizes people of faith and conscience to support farm worker led campaigns to improve farm workers’ working and living conditions.

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