

## **The Florida Catholic kicks off 'Long-Sleeve Relief' drive to help farmworkers**

By Theresa Oliver, Orlando

As partners with the Florida Catholic Conference, The Florida Catholic newspaper is instituting a "Long-Sleeve Relief" drive to collect long-sleeve cotton shirts for farmworkers in Florida. The shirts will defer clothing costs for the farmworkers, while providing them with protection against harmful pesticides.

"It's a great idea," said Nancy Powers, Florida Catholic Conference consultant for Farmworker Affairs. "There is certainly a need."

Powers said that thick, cotton long-sleeve shirts are the most desirable.

"No dress shirts or sweatshirts," Powers said. "The sturdy cotton shirts are more desirable in the fields and offer the most protection against harmful chemicals," she said.

Due to the consistency of pesticides in the fields, farmworkers go through shirts quickly and donations could protect them. The pesticides used with tomatoes are thicker and workers can only wear shirts once or twice before having to throw them away.

Powers said many farmworkers need shirts now, but others can use the shirts as late as May.

"Long-sleeve shirts will help protect, but will not prevent exposure to harmful pesticides," she said. "Shirts also protect workers from bugs, mosquitoes, sunburn and scratches."

A local church had a drive and collected more than 200 shirts. However, within two days they were gone, Powers said.

"They go through the shirts quickly. There is certainly a demand," she said.

"One of the most serious problems we hear about from workers in the fern and nursery industry is skin rashes. Local doctors are not used to seeing pesticide exposure and do not have experience with farmworker issues. In the worst case, the skin is permanently pocked. Workers also experience numbness in their hands and sometimes have to take a day off from work to regain feeling," Powers said.

Pesticide training is required by law, according to Powers. However, a concern is that what is given is not adequate.

"Workers are given a 10-minute video to watch and are considered trained," she said. "They are not necessarily going to remember what they learned after just 10 minutes and it does not give them the opportunity to practice safe behavior. Another concern is that warnings (on pesticides) are sometimes in English only."

In 2004, legislation was passed that allows farmworkers to ask for pesticide information, but many are afraid to ask for fear of losing their jobs, Powers said.

There is also not a lot of enforceability in the laws and sometimes supervisors are not properly trained in pesticide safety.

Mistakes happen when growers know it is not enforced. Many times growers are pushed to harvest and farmworkers pick produce too soon after spraying.

"The problems are real," Powers said.

One way to combat the problem is strong enforcement of existing laws.

"There was a joint legislative commission on migrant workers which consisted of hearings. It was clear to them that pesticide safety is not adequate," she said.

Another way to combat the problem is to increase the budget to allow for more inspectors, Powers said.

"Right now there are 10 inspectors for around 40,000 farms in Florida, a fraction in comparison to the state of California," she said.

Other ways to combat the problems are more training for farmworkers, increasing awareness in health care workers of the problems associated with farmworkers and pesticide exposure and more health clinics. She said consumers can also buy organic.

"This would create a market that does not require the use of as many chemicals," Powers said.

She recently logged on to a Web site that gave consumers the 10 best reasons for buying organic and, to her surprise, not one mentioned the safety of the farmworkers.

Sister Sara Proctor, a physician's assistant and the coordinator for Catholic Charities Mobile Medical Services, agrees there is a need for long-sleeve shirts for farmworkers.

"What we see as a mobile medical unit is a lot of upper respiratory problems, chronic cough, nasal congestion, sore throat and eye irritations. These could be from the sun or from the (pesticide) dust. But the skin rashes we suspect are from pesticides. We can't prove it, but this is what we see," Sister Proctor said.

Other medical problems that Sister Proctor sees are musculoskeletal problems, such as sore knees, aches and pains, stomach problems, poor diet and change of diet.

The Florida Catholic is working with the Florida Catholic Conference, Catholic school superintendents and religious education directors in Florida to coordinate the Long-Sleeve Relief drive.

Religious education directors and superintendents in turn sent out a request to all Catholic schools and religious education directors on the parish level inviting them to become involved in the project. Many have taken the Long-Sleeve Relief drive on as a Lenten project. A volunteer in each school or parish will organize individual drives and then deliver the shirts to various

drop-off locations (see sidebar on page A18). If the drop-off sites are too far away,

The Florida Catholic will pay for shipping or arrange for pickup for the parish groups.

"We are hopeful that the Long-Sleeve Relief drive will be big.

"We are hoping for at least 3,000 shirts, but would be happy if there are more. Our goal is for it to become annual," said Denise Kohmetscher, office manager of The Florida Catholic.

"We are a newspaper, but we are also a Catholic organization," Kohmetscher said. "We are a part of the community. We not only want to present problems to readers, but we want to be involved in finding solutions as well."

For more information on the Long-Sleeve Relief drive, contact Denise Kohmetscher at [dkohmetscher@thefloridacatholic.org](mailto:dkohmetscher@thefloridacatholic.org) or Gail Botticello at [gbotticello@thefloridacatholic.org](mailto:gbotticello@thefloridacatholic.org).