

Media Briefing: Farm Workers Mental Health in Georgia

The Stress and Mental Health of Farmers

A recent study conducted by the Georgia Rural Health Innovation Center at Mercer University, in collaboration with the Georgia Foundation for Agriculture, highlights the significant mental health challenges faced by farmers in the agricultural community.

This 2022 survey of 1,651 respondents revealed that a staggering 96 percent of farmers experience moderate to high levels of stress. Almost half of the respondents reported feeling sad or depressed, with 39 percent feeling hopeless.

Disturbingly, 29 percent of farmers report thinking of dying by suicide at least once per month, and 42 percent of all farmers have thought about dying by suicide at least once in the past 12 months. Most farmers reported not being able to access a psychologist (telephone, online or in-person). Approximately 60 percent of farmers do not have access to basic medical care.

First-generation farmers are even more vulnerable, with 60 percent having had suicidal thoughts in the past year and nine percent thinking about suicide daily.

Rural Georgia

Rural Georgia continues to face challenges in accessing health care, including behavioral health services. In May 2023, the Rural Health Information Hub identified a severe mental health professional shortage in 151 out of Georgia's 159 counties. While there is a statewide shortage of mental health professionals, all of Georgia's rural counties are considered to be mental health professional shortage areas.

Suicide rates have consistently been higher among rural residents compared to non-rural residents over the past decade. Although suicide rates peaked in rural areas in 2020, there has been a decrease in 2021 and 2022. The number of recorded suicides in rural Georgia increased more than 66 percent over the last 20 years.

Firearms are the leading “mechanism” used by rural Georgians who die by suicide. From 2017-2021, a higher proportion of suicide deaths in rural areas involved firearms in comparison to non-rural areas. Firearms were used in more than 75 percent of all suicides in rural communities from 2018 to 2021.

Georgia's Crisis Response System (GCAL and 988)

Rural Georgians, particularly those in South Georgia, are utilizing the Georgia Crisis and Access Line (GCAL) and 988 more frequently than their urban counterparts. This aligns with data on rural suicide rates, emphasizing the need for accessible mental health care in rural areas.

Georgia's comprehensive crisis response system has been in development for more than 15 years and aims to reach rural areas. GCAL has laid the foundation for a transformative behavioral health initiative, 988. Georgia has emerged as a leader in the nationwide rollout of 988.

DBHDD, with state and federal support, has invested nearly \$56 million in the state's crisis system. Additional counselors have been hired to handle crisis calls, and mobile crisis response teams have been expanded statewide.

Impacts on Farm Spouses

According to an article published by University of Georgia Cooperative Extension, farm wives face significant stressors due to their roles on family farms, including caregiving, farm work and emotional labor, which can lead to role strain and conflict.

Research indicates that depression is a common mental health concern among wives of farmers, with factors like farm-related injuries, financial worries and work situations influencing their well-being. The mental health of farm wives has been neglected by the mental health community, despite their crucial contributions to family farms and their resilience in managing multiple roles.

Effective mental health efforts for farm wives should involve outreach, exploration of role strain and coping strategies, peer support and validation of their strengths in their various farm-related roles. Farm wives represent a significant demographic in rural communities, and their well-being is essential for the overall health and stability of family farms.