

SENATE THIRD READING

SB 338 (Becker)

As Amended July 03, 2025

Majority vote

SUMMARY

Establishes the Virtual Health Hub for Rural Communities (VHRC) Pilot Program, and authorizes the State Department of Public Health (DPH) to administer the VHRC Pilot Program to expand access to health services for farmworkers in rural communities. Requires DPH to fund grants to two separate community-based organizations to establish and deploy virtual health hubs, as defined, and to administer the program and provide technical assistance to the grant recipients for any licensing or reporting requirements necessary to fulfill the program. Creates the Virtual Health Hub Fund (the Fund) and conditions implementation of this bill on no General Fund (GF) moneys being used.

COMMENTS

California's farmworker population. According to a July 2024 report published by the Giannini Foundation of Agricultural Economics at the University of California, Davis, California produces a third of U.S. vegetables and almost three-quarters of U.S. fruits and nuts. California is the largest employer of farm labor in the United States, accounting for up to a third of average farm employment and farm labor expenses. Most California farmworkers are Mexican immigrants, many of whom are not authorized to work in the United States. In 1986, the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) included a Special Agricultural Worker (SAW) program that allowed 1.1 million undocumented farmworkers to become legal immigrants, including 600,000 in California. However over half of these legalized workers soon left the farm workforce, so that half of California crop workers were unauthorized by the mid-1990s, a higher share than before IRCA.

Farmworker's economic contributions. According to the California Employment Development Department, California agriculture depends on nearly 800,000 migrant and seasonal farmworkers who cultivate over 400 different agricultural commodities across the state. These essential workers help California to lead the nation in the processing of agricultural goods with 59% of the country's vegetables and 61% of the nation's fruits and nuts (2023 crop year). California is the world's top exporter of produce.

Farmworker health. A 2022 University of California at Merced, Community and Labor Center report, "*Farmworker Health in California*," notes that agriculture is among the most dangerous occupations in the United States with an estimated 19.4 deaths per 100,000 workers due to agriculture related injuries in 2019, according to 2021 data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Workers are exposed to multiple occupational hazards including exposure to toxic chemicals such as pesticides, which can lead to cancer, cardiovascular disease, and neurological disorders. They work with dangerous farm instruments often without being provided with necessary Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and inadequate training which makes them highly vulnerable to fatal and non-fatal injuries. The nature of their work requires them to stay outdoors for long hours under conditions of elevated temperature and humidity, making them vulnerable to the development of heat-related illnesses. In California's inland regions where farmworkers concentrate (the Central Valley, Inland Empire, and Coachella

Valley/Imperial Valley) temperatures can exceed 110 degrees Fahrenheit during heat waves. Furthermore, during wildfire season, they are often asked to work without any PPE thereby increasing their risk of developing a variety of respiratory illnesses.

According to a 2025 Rand Report, "*Addressing Toxic Stress and Health Care Access in California Farmworker Communities*," farmworkers in California experience disproportionately high rates of uninsurance and typically live in rural areas that lack sufficient health resources. In a prior study, more than four out of five California farmworkers surveyed reported experiencing at least one Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) in early childhood. ACEs are stressful or traumatic events, such as neglect, abuse, and household dysfunction that can trigger a toxic stress response in the body, leading to poorer physical and mental health outcomes in adulthood.

Mobile Health Care Services Act (MHCSA). Under MHCSA, a mobile unit is a special purpose commercial coach, as specified, that is one of the following: a) it is approved by DPH as a service of a licensed health facility, as defined; b) it is approved by DPH as a service of a licensed clinic, as defined; c) it is licensed by DPH as a clinic, as defined; or, d) it is licensed as an "other" type of approved mobile unit by DPH, with "other" types limited to mobile units performing services within new health facility or clinic licensure categories created after the effective date of the MHCSA (which became effective in 1994). A mobile unit is permitted to be operated as an adjunct to a licensed health facility or to a licensed clinic, or as an independent-freestanding clinic, unless the parent clinic is exempt from licensure as with county clinics. According to DPH, as of January 2025, there are 211 freestanding or independently licensed mobile clinics in California, and 296 mobile units licensed as a service of a licensed clinic or health facility. This bill uses the term "virtual health hub" but defines it more narrowly focusing on the vehicle's equipment. It is unclear whether or not the virtual health hub vehicle envisioned by this bill would meet the licensing criteria for a mobile unit.

Farmworker Health Equity Express bus. According to the sponsor of this bill, Ayudando Latinos a Sonar (ALAS), the Farmworker Equity Express bus program is a pilot organized by ALAS and funded by a number of life science companies and foundations that began at the end of 2022. The bus is a mobile resource center that provides virtual connections to healthcare providers, in-person culturally-centered mental health services, online tutoring, and facilitating online adult classes through local community colleges. While health-focused, it primarily offers internet connection for farmworkers to access health care and education. According to the sponsors, the bus was able to serve 120 people a week rotating among up to 12 farms in the afternoons and early evenings.

According to the Author

California's agricultural industry is the breadbasket of the world, encompassing a significant majority of the state's geography. The author states that nearly half of all farmworkers in the United States reside in California, but unfortunately, these farmworkers work long hours and often have inadequate access to medical care and transportation because healthcare providers are often located nearer to urban centers. As a result, rural farm-working communities tend to be sicker and have lower life expectancies. The author concludes that this bill addresses this healthcare access disparity by providing mobile virtual health hubs equipped with virtual consultation capabilities such as preventative care, mental health services, health education, & wellness resources directly to the patients in rural areas who are in need of better access to care.

Arguments in Support

Ayudando Latinos a Sonar (ALAS), Life Science Cares Bay Area, and California Life Sciences are the sponsors of this bill and state that between one-third and one-half of all farm workers in America reside in California. Of these workers, the California Public Policy Institute reports that nearly 97% identify as Latino with 44% reporting they cannot read or speak any English. These individuals work long hours and are paid low wages with often inadequate access to medical care and transportation. A trip to the doctor's office is typically at least 20 miles away, and given the remote nature of many farms, public transportation is not always available. Additionally, many workers feel the pressure to not miss work for fear of losing employment resulting in many individuals delaying or never receiving care. Thus, preventable and treatable medical ailments like high blood pressure, diabetes, and respiratory illness, which already disproportionately impact this population, result in more adverse long-term health outcomes. The sponsors point to a recent survey by the UC Merced Community and Labor Center found that between one-third and one-half of respondents had at least one chronic condition, commonly high blood pressure and diabetes. The sponsors believe that the proposed pilot program is one way that California can lessen the gaps in healthcare and education felt by farm workers. Modeled after the successful launch of the ALAS Equity Express bus in 2022, the virtual Healthcare Rub for Rural Communities Pilot Program would provide virtual connections to healthcare providers, mental health services, and educational services to help improve health outcomes in underserved communities. The sponsors conclude that meeting families where they are and supporting them so they can improve their skills and advance themselves is key to closing the noted gaps in access to healthcare and educational achievement.

The United Farm Workers supports this bill and states that farm work is tough work. It is hard hours. Backbreaking. Under scorching suns. It's rural and remote. These working conditions make basic medical care as essential as the workers are.

Arguments in Opposition

None.

FISCAL COMMENTS

According to the Assembly Appropriations Committee, one-time cost pressures in the low hundreds of thousands of dollars for DPH to administer the pilot program with non-General Fund moneys.

VOTES

SENATE FLOOR: 38-0-2

YES: Allen, Alvarado-Gil, Archuleta, Arreguín, Ashby, Becker, Blakespear, Cabaldon, Caballero, Cervantes, Choi, Cortese, Dahle, Durazo, Gonzalez, Grayson, Grove, Hurtado, Jones, Laird, McGuire, McNerney, Menjivar, Niello, Ochoa Bogh, Padilla, Pérez, Richardson, Rubio, Seyarto, Smallwood-Cuevas, Stern, Strickland, Umberg, Valladares, Wahab, Weber Pierson, Wiener

ABS, ABST OR NV: Limón, Reyes

ASM HEALTH: 15-0-1

YES: Bonta, Chen, Addis, Aguiar-Curry, Caloza, Carrillo, Flora, Mark González, Krell, Patel, Celeste Rodriguez, Sanchez, Schiavo, Sharp-Collins, Stefani

ABS, ABST OR NV: Patterson

ASM APPROPRIATIONS: 15-0-0

YES: Wicks, Sanchez, Arambula, Calderon, Caloza, Dixon, Elhawary, Fong, Mark González, Ahrens, Pacheco, Pellerin, Solache, Ta, Tangipa

UPDATED

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CONSULTANT: Lara Flynn / HEALTH / (916) 319-2097

FN: 0001376