

# editorial

## Migrants get cold shoulder

**Tuesday, October 01, 2002** - We are nonplused by a decision of the U.S. Department of Agriculture that literally has pushed some migrant farm workers in the San Luis Valley out in the cold by jacking up rents for subsidized housing in Center.

The USDA spent \$1.5 million to build the Tierra Nueva Apartments so that migrant farm workers wouldn't have to live in substandard quarters. The building has three dormitories for about 200 single men, plus apartments for several families.

For decades, privately owned housing for migrant farm workers was a national disgrace: The agricultural workers and their families often lived in vermin-infested ramshackle camps with poor sanitation and no heating or plumbing. Facilities like Tierra Nueva were supposed to give the migrant workers and their families a decent place to live for modest rents.

But the USDA has boosted rent from about \$20 a week to \$65 to \$80 a week, which some of the workers can't afford, according to Raymond Hurtado, Tierra Nueva manager.

The migrants, who are working sorting potatoes from the San Luis Valley harvest, are mostly American citizens from Texas, New Mexico and Arizona Indian reservations. Some, including entire families with children, have been sleeping in flimsy tents, their cars or in the open, despite freezing nighttime temperatures and inclement weather, because they can't afford the rent.

Workers say that the formula for calculating their rent has been changed from 30 percent of their income based on 26 weeks of temporary work to the same percentage based on 52 weeks of full-time work. That's what has boosted the rents, although the USDA's manager of multi-family housing insists the formula hasn't been changed. "We're just enforcing the regulations now," said S.A. "Sam" Mitchell, who's based in Lakewood.

Mitchell implied that some workers were cheating by not disclosing their true income in order to take advantage of the subsidy. But migrant farm work is a seasonal occupation with long work days and back-breaking labor at minimum wage or below.

The USDA's action has strained the resources of La Puente Home, a shelter in Alamosa, which now is filled every night and has had to give motel vouchers to 70 to 90 people a night. Moreover, the valley's 12 food banks have been drained.

It's ludicrous to base the rent on a 52-week year, especially in the case of Native Americans who live on reservations where any employment often is non-existent.

Considering that the last four occupants of the White House have been multimillionaires (or at least financially comfortable people) living in subsidized government housing, it's rather petty of that same federal government to be so penurious in calculating the rents for migrant farm workers who help feed the nation and a good part of the world.

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