



Literacy program helps build up seasonal farm workers

By Erin Kelly for the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association

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One of the first essential steps for opening doors to more opportunities and experiences is to build confidence and knowledge.

And for seasonal migrant farm workers in southwestern Ontario, Frontier College is helping to do just that to ensure that they have safe and positive experiences while working on local farms.

As Canada’s original literacy organization, Frontier College offers numerous literacy programs across the country, with some 2,500 trained volunteers working with 32,000 children, youth, and adults every year. Among the organization’s various offerings is the Literacy Outreach Program.

Through classes on literacy and other skills, this unique program supports seasonal migrant agricultural workers in Southwestern Ontario to make stronger contributions to their workplace, as well as deeper connections to the communities they live in.

“Seasonal agricultural workers are important to Canada’s food and agricultural system,” explains Janine Wass, Frontier College’s Regional Coordinator of Southwestern Ontario. “While in Canada, they may face barriers to learning, such as isolation from their families and difficulties with communication with their employers, co-workers, and other community members.

“Our Literacy Outreach Program is designed to remove some of these barriers by bringing language and literacy classes to seasonal agricultural workers in their workplaces, including farms, greenhouses, and libraries.”

Using Frontier College’s “All Welcome” philosophy, the program offers weekend and evening classes throughout the growing and harvest season at a limited number of locations in Leamington and Norfolk County. Not only do the classes provide instruction on literacy, language, numeracy, and other essential skills, they also help workers improve their self-confidence—all of which, explains Janine, are crucial for success in the workplace and community.





But the program doesn't just benefit the workers who take part; it also provides many advantages to area farmers, particularly when it comes to workplace safety.

Language proficiency and literacy can pose challenges for ensuring the health and safety of seasonal farm workers. With the Literacy Outreach Program, workers receive training to build skills that better enable them to contribute to a safe work environment.

“Both Frontier College and employers recognize the importance of literacy skills in creating a safe and healthy work environment,” says Janine, adding that area farmers have been very supportive of the program by allocating space on their property for classes, with some even offering printing and program supplies or providing free lunches to participating workers.

Given the program's unique training, its popularity certainly comes as no surprise. In 2018 alone, more than 200 seasonal agricultural workers benefited from the Literacy Outreach Program. And while it's positive that so many are interested in participating, Janine notes that Frontier College's ability to provide instruction for the program is dependent on available funding and staffing.

To provide more seasonal farm workers with essential skills, Frontier College is hoping to expand the Literacy Outreach Program by raising funds through its Plant a Seed – Grow a Program fundraiser, which runs until June 7.

Canadian Agricultural Safety Week (CASW) is an annual campaign held the third week of March of each year. In 2019, Safe & Strong Farms: Build an AgSafe Canada, takes place March 10 to 16. CASW is presented by Farm Credit Canada. For more information visit agsafetyweek.ca.

Cutline FrontierCollege1: Area farmers have been very supportive of the Literacy Outreach Program, even hosting graduation ceremonies to celebrate learners' achievements.

Cutline FrontierCollege2: The Literacy Outreach Program supports seasonal migrant agricultural workers in Southwestern Ontario to make stronger contributions to their workplace.

Cutline FrontierCollege3: The Literacy Outreach Program brings language and literacy classes to seasonal agricultural workers in their workplaces.

