
Controls Not Protection:

*New Federal Proposals Set to Worsen
Migrant Worker Crisis*

Migrant Rights Network
June 2025

***Not one of these changes is to protect us. This is all
about having more control over more workers, this is
not for us.***

38-year-old Jamaican SAWP worker, 9 seasons

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Migrant Rights Network

The Migrant Rights Network is Canada's largest coalition of migrant-led organizations. These submissions are developed by the Food & Farm Workers Working Group composed of Migrant Workers Alliance for Change, Centre for Migrant Worker Rights Nova Scotia, Cooper Institute, FCJ Refugee Centre, Madhu Verma Migrant Justice Centre, Migrant Workers Centre, and Sanctuary Health.

For questions about this report, please contact info@migrantrights.ca

Executive Summary

Overview

This submission presents voices of 514 migrant workers across Canada—322 comprehensive survey respondents and 192 focus group participants—representing migrant workers across 7 provinces plus international participants from Jamaica, Trinidad, Mexico, and Guatemala. Participants have extensive experience in Canada's temporary foreign worker programs, with a mean of 6.2 years and up to 20 years in the programs.

We conducted these surveys and focus groups to gather migrant worker input on five sets of changes to federal migrant worker programs presented via discussion papers by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC). As has happened many times previously, this submission by Migrant Rights Network will likely be the most comprehensive assessment of migrant workers' experiences of systematic exploitation within current temporary foreign worker systems and present migrant workers' alternatives to the proposals made by the federal government.

The findings reveal a system of institutionalized control that traps migrant workers in conditions resembling indentured servitude, where employer-tied permits, substandard housing, wage theft through excessive deductions, healthcare denial, and transportation exploitation combine to create what migrant workers themselves describe as modern slavery. The proposed changes by the federal government fail to address or transform these conditions instead either keeping in place a system of abuse and exploitation, and in some cases making it worse.

The Crisis & How Proposed Changes Make It Worse

Employer Control Through Tied Permits

- 93% of survey respondents reported tied permits make it harder to assert rights
- 49.14% say tied permits completely undermine their ability to protect themselves
- 81.25% demand immediate permanent resident status on landing

Government Proposal: Instead of ending employer restricted work permits, the federal government is proposing 'Stream-specific permits' that maintain employer control while creating an illusion of mobility that 95% of migrant workers surveyed recognize as ineffective.

They say it's to help us change jobs, but the reality is the same control—boss signs off or I'm out. – Ontario TFW Greenhouse Worker, Jamaica, 3 seasons

Financial Exploitation

- **83.55% of migrant workers surveyed reported their wages are insufficient** to support themselves and their families
- **55.7% don't have enough income remaining after deductions to cover other needs;** 27.85% say it is impossible to make ends meet
- **Migrants are paying for travel even though employers are supposed to pay:** Median \$880 per trip for travel costs
- Migrant workers report working **long hours with low wages** and extensive deductions during busy periods; and **not working enough** and still needing to pay housing and deductions in less busy periods.

Whenever wages go up, the boss finds a way to take away the raise through deductions. – TFW Poultry Worker, Leamington, 5 seasons

Government Proposal: Instead of ensuring decent work and income, the federal government is proposing to allow employers to claw back up to \$1,000 monthly through increased deductions—effectively allowing employers to take nearly \$1,000 of migrant workers' already insufficient pay.

Housing Crisis

- **66% report poor or very bad housing conditions**
- **66.9% afraid to complain** about housing due to employer retaliation
- **64.9% demand housing to continue to be employer paid, with no deductions** from migrant workers' pay
- **Top problems with housing:** No privacy, insufficient kitchens/bathrooms, overcrowding and filth.
- **Migrants are afraid to request inspections:** Only 12% requested inspections, 75% saw no improvements after their requests.
- **Housing standards proposed in 2020 were never implemented.**

I sleep eight to a room with no locks. We have to pee in bottles at night. It's hotter than an oven

TFW Mushroom Harvester, Mexico, 7 years

Government Proposal: Instead of creating enforceable housing standards, the federal government is proposing vague and unenforceable guidelines and allowing employers to charge migrant workers 5-30% of wages for the same substandard conditions —replacing the specific, measurable standards proposed in 2020 with subjective terms like "adequate" and "reasonable" that give employers complete discretion.

Healthcare Denial

- 37.5% report employer interference with healthcare access
- 7.24% denied healthcare over 10 times
- 19.85% never received health cards for public health insurance

My boss approved or cancelled my appointments—if I pressed it, I'd lose hours.
— TFW Poultry Worker, Ontario, 6 seasons

Government Proposal: The government's proposals focus on encouraging employers to provide access to coverage instead of giving migrant workers the power to access healthcare.

Why These Changes? Why Now?

On August 8, 2024 - the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, Professor Tomoya Obokata, issued a report in which he reiterated that Canada's immigration systems are a "breeding ground for contemporary forms of slavery" and that "the structural precarity for temporary foreign workers would be mitigated by systematically providing migrant workers with a pathway to permanent residence"¹.

¹ Visit to Canada- Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences, Tomoya Obokata, 22 July 2024, para. 37.

The UN Special Rapporteur echoed the migrant justice movement's demand for Status for All, saying "clear status for all migrant workers would provide them with a secure footing on which to enjoy the full spectrum of their human rights, while continuing to contribute to Canadian society."

Regarding the government's current and proposed policy measures, the UN rapporteur:

- Criticized "the recent policy shift to reduce the number of temporary residents [which] will not address the challenges faced by those who continue to enter through the same programme";
- Recommended that Canada "regularize workers who have lost status" - a promise made by PM Trudeau in December 2021, and which has still not been implemented;
- Rejected sectoral-specific work permits, insisting that "shifting from employer-specific to sector-specific work permits is, on its own, unlikely to significantly improve conditions for workers";
- Concluded that the Open Work Permit for Vulnerable Workers "does not provide an effective solution" to the abuse workers face.

These criticisms, broadly amplified in Canadian and international media, and a corresponding study in Parliament², has resulted in the federal government moving quickly to put forward proposals to 'improve' the temporary foreign workers program.

However, the changes proposed do not address either the underlying causes of exploitation or abuse, nor do they implement the recommendations by the UN Special Rapporteur. Instead, the proposed changes by the federal government are either cosmetic, aiming to change the names of the programs, and tweak at the edges; or worse - to actually give employers more power to take more money from migrant workers.

Agri-Food Lobby Gets What It Wants; Migrant Suffer

The proposed changes by ESDC provide big Agri-Food Lobby Groups what they are seeking without giving migrant workers what they need. Specifically:

- **Stream-Specific Work Permits:** The stream-specific work permits proposed by ESDC continue to keep migrant workers tied to employers and excluded from permanent residency, but increase the length of LMIA's to two years - a demand that employers have called for a long time so as to reduce their administrative overhead.
- **Housing Guidelines:** While the housing guidelines proposed are vague and non-enforceable, they give in to employer demands who have long called for an increase in

² Closed Work Permits in the Temporary Foreign Workers Program, October 2024:
<https://www.ourcommons.ca/Committees/en/CIMM/StudyActivity?studyActivityId=12345319>

deductions for housing from migrant workers, even as they make no effort to make housing humane.

- **Wages and Deductions:** While the proposed new wage model does not address migrant workers financial crisis, it does increase the amount of money employers will be able to claw back.
- **Healthcare:** While the new guidelines “encourage” employers to ensure migrant workers are registered for healthcare, no provisions are put in place to require employers to guarantee access to healthcare.

Migrant Recommendations

Migrant workers reject most of the proposed changes to the TFW programs proposed by ESDC. Instead, we insist on fundamental transformations to the system:

1. Ensure Labour Mobility & Permanent Residency Upon Arrival

- **Eliminate all restricted permits, including employer-tied and stream-specific permits,** that enable exploitation and restrict labour mobility.
- **Grant permanent residency** to all migrants upon arrival, in order to ensure real labor mobility and end exploitative permit dependencies.
- **Provide government-funded job transfer support,** including legal aid and relocation assistance, for migrant workers wishing to change employers.
- **Guarantee access to jobs,** including via recall rights (right of first refusal) for seasonal migrant workers, and safeguards against employer reprisals and blacklisting.

2. Establish Enforceable Housing Standards

- **Implement specific and measurable housing standards as we recommended in 2020** including minimum space requirements, lockable bedrooms, and temperature controls, as well as at least one month of free tenancy following a notice of eviction or termination of employment.
- **Explicit measures to prevent employer interference** in inspections related to housing standards, with penalties being issued for any such interference.
- **Zero deductions for housing** - maintain free housing for SAWP workers. If deductions are imposed, these must be capped at 5% of wages and must not be charged during periods where there is no work.
- **Give migrant workers the ability to choose their housing,** and have government-provided alternatives when employers fail to meet standards.

3. Ensure Fair Wages Without Exploitation

- **Set a minimum wage of \$20-25/hour** with a guaranteed minimum of 40 hours/week
- **Restrict total deductions to 0% of gross wages** including housing and service fees
- **Prohibit deductions during non-work periods** and off-seasons
- **Provide full access to Employment Insurance** including during off-season periods outside Canada

4. Guarantee Universal Healthcare Access

- **Immediate access to health coverage and health cards upon arrival**, to address acute injuries and chronic occupational illnesses, including calling on provinces to waive residency wait-times.
- **Ensure at least 12 paid sick days and transportation to healthcare services** so that migrant workers are not restricted from getting care.
- **Ban employer interference**: legally prohibit employer involvement in appointment scheduling, medical records, and results.
- **Eliminate private-insurance deductions**: public plans must cover the full range of necessary treatments, including mental health and pandemic response.
- **Universal workplace-safe insurance and compensation**: Ensure migrant workers have access to care after injury including upon return to home country.
- **Extension of healthcare coverage to dependents in home countries** and assurance that private insurers (e.g., Cowan) cover essential medications without employer interference.
- **Mandatory death insurance coverage**: All employers must obtain insurance that covers the full costs of a worker's death, including local burial in Canada or repatriation of remains to the home country, depending on family wishes. Coverage must include 100% of associated expenses—transportation of the body, funeral service costs, documentation, and transport for personal effects—with no family ever having to choose between crushing debt or abandoning their loved one's remains abroad.

5. Ensure Fair Transportation

- **Require employers to assume** all travel expenses, without deducting anything from migrant workers' pay
- **Require that employers cover all travel costs** including hotels, meals, and ground transportation from their hometown to the departing airport and from arriving airport to final destination.
- **Provide free access to local transportation** for groceries, healthcare, and social needs
- **Allow migrant workers to choose their flights** and travel arrangements

The evidence is clear: ESDC's proposed reforms maintain the fundamental power imbalances that enable systematic exploitation of migrant workers. Cosmetic changes to an inherently exploitative system will not address the root causes of the problems documented in this submission.

Migrant workers are demanding—and deserve—a system based on permanent residency, real labour mobility, decent work and human dignity. The choice before policymakers is whether to continue a system that migrant workers themselves describe as modern slavery or to embrace evidence-based reforms that uphold Canada's stated commitment to human rights and fair labour standards.

The 514 migrant workers who contributed to this submission have provided a roadmap for change. The question is whether Canada's government will follow and act on it.

Section 1: Methodology

In total, **514** migrant workers participated in creating these submissions: **322** quantitative survey respondents and **192** focus group participants.

Online Survey

(**n=322**) Survey included 23 questions in English/Spanish on housing, finances, permits, transport, healthcare, and demographics; distributed via worker-led networks; analyzed with Chi-Square ($\alpha=0.05$). Not all questions were answered by all participants - we have excluded from this analysis participants who did not complete at least 75% of the survey. The majority of the unanswered questions were demographic, therefore the answers below are representative of most respondents.

- **Languages:** 62% Spanish; 38% English.
- **Gender:** 85% male; 14% female; 1% other.
- **Provincial Distribution:**
 - Ontario - 55%
 - British Columbia - 20%
 - Quebec - 15%
 - Alberta - 5%
 - Nova Scotia - 2%
 - New Brunswick - 2%
 - Prince Edward Island - 1%
- **Country of Origin:**
 - Mexico - 45%
 - Jamaica - 20%
 - Trinidad & Tobago - 10%
 - Guatemala - 12%
 - Philippines - 7%
 - Other - 6%
- **Length of Residence:** Mean 6.2 years; median 5 years; longest 20 years.
- **Seasonality:** 60% seasonal; 40% non-seasonal.

Focus Groups

(**n=192**) Online focus groups were automatically transcribed, notes were taken for in-person focus groups, including many direct quotes. Using Python, main ideas and concepts were identified and a

coding framework was developed which was then grouped into broader themes. To get a sense of how participants felt about different topics, we ran a sentiment analysis to measure the emotional tone across these themes. We also counted word frequencies to back up our interpretations. This combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques gave us a thorough, replicable way to analyze what participants recommended. Through this process, key recommendations were identified for every issue.

- **Participants by location:**
 - Ontario: 70
 - Nova Scotia: 40
 - British Columbia: 35
 - New Brunswick: 15
 - Outside Canada (from Jamaica, Trinidad, Mexico, and Guatemala): 32
- **Gender:**
 - 75–80% male
 - 20–25% female
- **Programs Represented:** SAWP, Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP), fishery workers, and undocumented workers.
- **Age:** Ranging from early 20s to mid-60s, representing both newer and long-term program participants (between 1 and 20 years coming to Canada).

Section 2: What Workers Really Want

We surveyed workers about their priorities, not only about the proposals provided by ESDC, presenting options that we hear the most from migrant workers across the country.

Here is what migrants said:

Which of these do you want?	Response Percentage
Better work conditions: Higher wages, paid overtime, holiday pay and paid sick days	91.67%
No tied work permits	89.58%
Be paid a minimum of 40 hours per week in any season	83.33%
Immediate permanent resident status for me and my family	81.25%
Be able to come back to Canada without requiring employer invitation or LMIA	81.25%
Allow family members to visit, or live, work and study with me	79.17%
Free access to healthcare and medication without delays	77.08%
Access to Employment Insurance	75.00%
Be able to choose my employer	66.67%
Better housing and no rent	62.50%
No detentions or deportations	62.26%
Be able to get my drivers license	60.42%
Transportation - to groceries, social activities and healthcare	50.00%

These are the priorities of the workers who come to Canada through the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, and we urge the federal government to overhaul the program based on these priorities.

Section 3: Responses to ESDC Proposals

3.a. Stream-Specific Work Permit

Migrant Worker Indentureship Today

They're pressuring us from every side, how are we supposed to survive? We thought they erased the shackles of slavery when we started getting pay, but now we see the pay is just a token and the shackles are the permit and the laws and housing

42-year-old father of 3 from Jamaica

Migrant workers face a system of indentured servitude and extreme exploitation because of tied work permits - something the UN has called a 'breeding ground for contemporary forms of slavery'. If a worker tries to assert their basic rights, they face not only loss of income but also homelessness (because they live in employer-controlled housing), and deportation (because employers can force them out of the country and bar them from returning).

Under the current system, Temporary Foreign Workers hold employer-specific work permits tied to a single Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA). To leave abusive employers or find alternative or additional work, migrant workers must:

1. Find an employer willing to offer them a new job. To do so, they often approach agencies or recruiters who charge high fees and often lie about work conditions.
2. The prospective employers must get a Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA) at a cost of \$1,000 which is often passed on to workers.
3. Apply for a work permit once the LMIA is approved.

4. Wait weeks or months for processing, during which they lose income and may lose their immigration status.

Migrant workers in the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program are theoretically eligible to change jobs within the same sector so long as their employers and their sending country representatives approve - which rarely happens and requires the worker to 'out' themselves to their abusive employer.

Migrant workers are able to apply for an Open Work Permit for Vulnerable Workers if they are facing abuse. However, the eligibility and evidence requirements are out of reach for most migrant workers, approval rates are low, and wait times are long. Even when granted, the permit is only valid for one year and is non-renewable, after which migrant workers must get back into the LMIA stream or become undocumented.

Migrant workers who assert their rights or raise workplace concerns are often blacklisted by being immediately sent home and/or not being called back to the program the following year. Migrant workers who have an Open Work Permit for Vulnerable Workers are often considered by other employers as 'problem workers' and therefore struggle to find work in the same sector. Whether the blacklisting occurs or not is secondary to the effect on the ground: the vast majority of workers we serve have experienced retaliation, threats of retaliation, or seen coworkers experience retaliation, and therefore choose not to pursue complaints or report their employers out of fear that they would not be invited back to work.

I hope something can be done about the permits so we stop having closed permits, which is what they've said is modern slavery.

— Niagara in-person, SAWP Grape Worker, Mexico, 5 years

Does your current tied permit (where you cannot change employers) make it harder for you to protect yourself and assert your rights?	Response percentage
Completely	49.14%
A lot	24.55%
A little	10.08%
Some	9.49%
Not at all	6.77%

93% of respondents said that tied permits make it harder for them to protect themselves and assert their rights.

ESDC's Stream-Specific Work Permit Proposal

ESDC is proposing a Stream-Specific Work Permit (SSWP) for the new Agriculture & Fish Processing Stream, featuring:

1. **Refillable TFWEA (Temporary Foreign Worker Employer Authorization), also called LMIA:** A two-year LMIA allowing employers to refill positions during one or two defined seasons without reapplying.
2. **Sector Mobility:** Workers can switch employers within the Agriculture & Fish Processing Stream without new permits, provided the prospective employer holds an unfilled TFWEA.
3. **Seasonal Return Requirement:** Agricultural workers must still return home at the end of each contract period, unless they secure a fresh job offer extending their stay.
4. **Multiple-Entry Visa Alignment:** Visa-required nationals receive a multiple-entry traveller document concurrent with their SSWP validity.
5. **Centralized Source-Government Portal:** A digital platform for bulk permit applications and real-time tracking, designed for bilateral programs like SAWP.

Migrant Workers Do Not Believe These Permits Are The Answer

From a worker's perspective, in order to leave a bad job under this new system, a worker would have to find another employer with an unfilled TFWEA/LMIA. This is highly unlikely, because:

- Employers do not apply for LMIAs without filling them, as this represents an unrecovered cost;
- Even if they do, employers do not advertise in a way that workers can access easily (considering their limited literacy, language barriers, lack of internet, long work hours, etc). As with the Canada Job Bank, most of the jobs that are listed are often already filled, because employers do not take them down once they are filled.
- As we have learned from the Open Work Permits for Vulnerable Workers, employers do not hire workers who leave a bad job.

- In other jurisdictions where sectoral work permits have been implemented, evidence has shown that employers collude with each other to ensure ‘problem’ workers are not rehired elsewhere³.

Even with a stream permit, the boss holds the power. If I leave, I lose everything.
 – Online, TFW Greenhouse Worker, Jamaica, 3 seasons

95% of survey respondents believe that there are significant problems with this new approach.

What problems would you face with the new permit the government is proposing?	Response percentage
Few bosses have vacant LMIA, so no jobs are available	60.66%
It will still be hard to leave a bad job	57.38%
Bosses talk to each other and don't hire workers who leave bad jobs	57.38%
Agencies will charge us to find jobs	47.54%
I don't see any problems	4.92%

They say it's to help us change jobs, but the reality is the same control—boss signs off or I'm out. - Former Fishery Worker, Mexico

In the focus groups, workers across all streams decried employer-tied work permits as a form of modern slavery, trapping them in abusive conditions and stripping them of bargaining power. They urged an end to tied permits, clear rules for job transfers and recall rights, and permanent residency for migrant workers and their families to eliminate the fear of deportation as a disciplining mechanism. Uncertainty during grey area periods between contracts, lack of spousal or study permits, and inability to change employers without risking deportation were highlighted as daily sources of fear and powerlessness.

³ Human Rights Watch (2015). A Raw Deal: Abuses of Thai Workers in Israel's Agricultural Sector. (January 2015).

To find a new job they ask you for a letter of recommendation and they wouldn't give it to you. On the contrary, they would contact the new employer so that they wouldn't hire you just to punish you for leaving. - Mexican farmworker, British Columbia.

What Migrants Demand

1. **Eliminate all restricted permits, including employer-tied and stream-specific permits,** that enable exploitation and restrict labour mobility.
2. **Grant permanent residency** to all migrants upon arrival, in order to ensure real labor mobility and end exploitative permit dependencies.
3. **Provide government-funded job transfer support,** including legal aid and relocation assistance, for migrant workers wishing to change employers.
4. **Guarantee access to jobs,** including via recall rights (right of first refusal) for seasonal migrant workers, and safeguards against employer reprisals and blacklisting.

3.b. Employer-Provided Accommodations

Migrant Worker Housing Today

- Housing for workers in the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program is free - except in BC which allows minor deductions at \$7.11 per working day, not to exceed \$946.95 total during the worker's stay.
- Temporary Foreign Workers in the low-wage stream usually live in private rental housing, but this is often obtained for workers by the employer, or the landlord has a relationship with the employer. This housing is almost never inspected and employers deduct variable amounts from workers' pay.
- There are no national housing standards for migrant worker housing, and inspections are largely carried out by Public Health Agencies or contracted to third-party private agencies (BC). Public health agencies are underfunded and rely on provincial inspection guidelines. In Nova Scotia, there is no centralized agency that conducts inspections. Often inspectors do not inspect housing at all before workers arrive, or only inspect a sample.

66% of survey respondents said their housing was either poor or very bad; 24% said it was okay, and only 10% said it was good.

Problem in Housing	Response percentage
No privacy	66.29%
Not enough kitchens or bathrooms	52.59%
Not enough laundry	40.26%
Overcrowded	40.19%
Dirty	39.8%
No space for families	35.19%
Boss watches or controls us	32.45%
Too hot or too cold	31.44%
Rats, bugs, or other pests	24.08%
No clean water	5.45%
Housing close to pesticides	4.82%

Context: The 2020 Proposed National Housing Standards

At the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, migrant farmworkers were 5 times more likely to be infected by COVID than healthcare workers as a result of overcrowding, and many workers died. This resulted in a [proposal for comprehensive national housing standards by the federal government](#) introduced in December 2020. These standards were specific, proposing:

- Indoor temperature requirements: housing must allow **20 °C – 25.5 °C** to be maintained at all times, using proper heating and air-conditioning equipment.
- Common living spaces: **maximum occupancy 7.44 m² (80 sq ft) of usable, unobstructed floor area per person.**
- Bedrooms: **maximum four workers per room** and **minimum 2.0 m between beds.**
- Bed specifications: bed frame **≥ 20 cm off the floor**; mattress **≥ 95.6 cm × 190.5 cm × 25 cm** with a clean pillow.
- Linen package on arrival: **two pillowcases, two sheet sets, and at least one blanket per bed**, all clean and in good condition.
- Personal storage: **enclosed locker, shelf, or small dresser (2–4 ft)** for each worker near the bed.
- Bedroom furnishings and security: **desk, padded chair, waste-basket, four coat hooks**, full door with mortise-type lock; one key per occupant.
- **Gender allocation:** males and females do not share bedrooms unless spouses; spouses receive a double or queen-size mattress.

- Washrooms located **within the accommodation**; separated from sleeping rooms by **full partitions and lockable doors**; equipped with **separate ventilation** and an exhaust fan.
- **Ratios**: 1 toilet : 5 workers; 1 shower with dressing cubicle : 4 workers; 1 sink with mirror and hot (> 43 °C) & cold water : 4 workers; 1 urinal : 15 workers.
- Eating facilities: 1 dining table & chairs : 10 workers; 1 microwave : 10 workers; 1 four-burner stove/oven : 6 workers; 1 refrigerator (≤ 4 °C) : 6 workers; adequate cabinets and shelves.
- Laundry facilities: free; **1 full-size washer and dryer : 10 workers**; additional drying facilities in laundry area; PPE-cleaning equipment separate from laundry machines and living areas.
- Connectivity: access to telephone service and **free internet where available**.

Migrant worker groups accepted the recommendations and called for further improvements following extensive consultations with workers. The Migrant Rights Network gathered input from 453 workers and proposed improvements to the standards. See our full submission [here](#). We are including that submission as part of this review.

Four years have passed since this proposal was made and no action has been taken, while migrants continue to suffer in inhospitable and sub-standard housing.

ESDC's New Proposed Housing Guidelines

Instead of accepting migrant worker recommendations and expanding on the specific standards proposed in 2020, ESDC is now proposing 12 vague and non-enforceable guidelines:

1. Accommodation is **adequately** supplied with potable **hot and cold** running water.
2. Accommodation is supplied with **sufficient** natural and/or mechanical ventilation that is in working condition, to maintain **proper air quality and temperature**.
3. Accommodation adheres to applicable fire safety requirements and be approved for occupancy.
4. Accommodation is **structurally sound** and must be maintained in waterproof, windproof, and weatherproof condition.
5. Hazardous materials (e.g., fertilizers, pesticides, boilers, industrial fans, harmful chemicals, heaters) are stored at a **sufficient** distance away from living and sleeping quarters.
6. Accommodation has an **adequate** plumbing system and sanitary drainage system or private sewage disposal system that is in proper operating condition.
7. Accommodation is free of pest and rodent infestations.
8. **Adequate** lighting is available in all rooms, by either natural and/or artificial means.
9. Accommodation is **adequately** equipped with **basic furnishings** that are in good condition and compatible with the maximum occupancy.

10. Accommodation has **reasonable** proximity between bedrooms, bathrooms and kitchens.
11. **Maximum occupancy** of the accommodation is not exceeded.
12. If inspection is done by a **private inspector**, the private inspector has proof that they have the delegation or authorization of the respective P/T to conduct the HIR inspection.

The 2020 standards translated lived experience into clear numbers that inspectors could measure and enforce. These revised 2025 guidelines remove all quantitative metrics and replace them with subjective concepts like *adequate*, *sufficient*, and *reasonable*. This gives all power back to employers and leaves migrant workers in overcrowded, poorly maintained housing they cannot complain about because their livelihood depends on it.

For example:

- **No temperature standards:** Instead of 20–25°C requirements, guidelines now vaguely reference "proper temperature" while workers sweat in 40°C bunkhouses or freeze in unheated trailers.
- **No washroom ratios:** "Adequate plumbing" replaces specific toilet-to-worker ratios, allowing employers to provide 5 toilets for forty people or outdoor porta-potties.
- **No furniture specifications:** Detailed bed dimensions and furnishing lists become "basic furnishings"—often just a sagging bunk and milk crate.
- **No occupancy limits:** The 80 sq ft per person standard vanishes, making overcrowding—the top worker complaint—effectively legal.
- **No proximity requirements:** Workers can now be housed in distant sheds, making winter dashes through snow "reasonable proximity."

These new diluted guidelines demonstrate a capitulation to lobbying by employers - who do not want to spend more money to provide decent housing for their workers - and how little the federal government values migrant worker input on its policies, despite stating otherwise.

Nearly every focus group raised housing as a critical issue, second only to wages. As one of the focus group participants said about their housing:

We feel like we are treated worse than animals, no feelings of respect. The farm animals have a back up generator but the bunkhouse doesn't. Farm crops and animals enjoy more respect, attention and priority than migrant workers.

The Impossibility Of Enforcement

Not only are the guidelines themselves non-specific and non-enforceable, they do not deal with the fundamental issue of employer control. Because of their temporary immigration status, workers risk everything if they choose to speak up or make complaints, and thus are simply unable to access what complaint mechanisms may exist.

66.9% (32.76% many times; 34.12 sometimes) of survey respondents said they were ‘afraid to complain about housing because their boss might get angry’.

Only 12% of survey respondents said they requested an inspection - of which 75% said the request did not result in improvements to their housing. Focus group participants similarly expressed deep skepticism that proposed standards would be enforced. This is the product of years of experience that workers have with regulations and standards that do not work even when they are enforced.

Migrant Workers Reject Increased Deductions for Housing

If they want to start charging us for rent, we want our own rooms. It's not right that when we want to have a private phone call with our family, we must go out in the cold, in the night, into the bush just to have a little bit of privacy.

ESDC is proposing to allow employers to deduct 5% to 30% of migrant workers’ wages in return for following the vague, subjective, non-enforceable guidelines above.

How much should your boss be able to deduct from your wages for housing?	Response percentage
0% – housing should be free	64.945%
5% of your wages(about \$130/month)	32.105%
15% of your wages (about \$500/month)	1.43%
30% of your wages (about \$1,000/month)	1.52%

When asked, **65% of migrant workers said they believe that housing should be free.** Most focus group participants said they’d rather quit the Temporary Foreign Worker Program than accept further rent deductions without real and significant improvements to their undignified housing.

They don't have washing machines or clothes dryers. We workers ourselves had to pay for a dryer because the boss said no. There's a lack of air conditioning, so the workers themselves had to buy fans and other appliances to cool the house and be able to rest from work fatigue during very hot days because the house is very hot. If I continue, I won't finish listing all the services that my house lack—even bathrooms and urinals we need to walk for outside.

What Migrants Demand:

- **Implement specific and measurable housing standards as we recommended in 2020** including minimum space requirements, lockable bedrooms, and temperature controls, as well as at least one month of free tenancy following a notice of eviction or termination of employment.
- **Explicit measures to prevent employer interference** in inspections related to housing standards, with penalties being issued for any such interference.
- **Zero deductions for housing** - maintain free housing for SAWP workers. If deductions are imposed, these must be capped at 5% of wages and must not be charged during periods where there is no work.
- **Give migrant workers the ability to choose their housing**, and have government-provided alternatives when employers fail to meet standards.

3.c. Wages & Deductions

Migrant Workers Are Struggling With Financial Precarity

Migrant workers are struggling to make ends meet. Despite working long hours in difficult conditions—sometimes 60–70 hours per week—workers report an inability to take care of themselves and their families.

We work 60 hours for CAD 15/hour, but after deductions we earn less than CAD 12.

SAWP Apple Harvester, Jamaica, 8 years

Whenever wages go up, the boss finds a way to take away the raise through deductions. – TFW Poultry Worker, Leamington, 5 seasons

Currently, after deductions, do you have enough to support yourself, send money home and save for the future?	Response Percentage
Not enough	55.70%
No, it's impossible	27.85%
Just enough	15.19%
More than enough	1.27%

83.55% of migrant worker survey respondents said that the wages are too low to take care of themselves and their families.

ESDC's proposal: Take More Money From Workers

This is the scenario created by ESDC of the impact of its proposed changes for harvesting labourers in Ontario

Category	Current Approach - SAWP Caribbean	Current Approach - SAWP Mexico	Current Approach - Agricultural Stream	Proposed ESDC Approach - Lowest Range of Deductions	Proposed ESDC Approach - Highest Range of Deductions
Gross Earnings	\$3,581.08	\$3,581.08	\$3,581.08	\$3,581.08	\$3,581.08
Source Country Deductions	\$162.76 (\$6.26 per workday)	\$32.85 (\$1.08 per day)	\$0	\$32.85 (\$1.08 per day)	\$162.76 (\$6.26 per workday)
Housing Deductions	\$0	\$0	\$129.90 (on-farm \$30 per week)	\$179.05 (5% of gross earnings)	\$1,074.32 (30% of gross earnings)

Transportation	\$61.75 (\$494 for Toronto divided by 8)	\$78.75 (\$630 for Toronto divided by 8)	\$0	\$0	\$70.25 (Average of SAWP Caribbean and Mexico)
Utility costs	\$71.50 (\$2.75 per working day)	\$71.50 (\$2.75 per working day)	0	Merged with housing deductions	Merged with housing deductions
Grand Total	\$3,285.07	\$3,397.98	\$3,451.18	\$3,369.18	\$2,273.75
Note: ESDC has not calculated deductions for CPP, EI and other federal and provincial deductions - so actual Gross Pay is lower than what's listed here					
Total deductions	\$296.01	\$183.10	\$129.90	\$221.90	\$1,307.33

Effectively what ESDC is proposing is that:

- At the lowest level of deductions - a Caribbean SAWP worker may make an additional \$84; a Mexican SAWP worker would lose \$28.80; and a TFW agricultural worker may make an additional \$82. As there are far more SAWP workers than there are TFW agricultural workers, overall workers lose income.
- At the highest level of deduction, however, **employers would be able to claw back nearly \$1,000 of workers' pay.**

Considering that most workers are struggling to make ends meet already, and the employers will receive most of the deductions - this proposed approach is nothing more than employers clawing back the already incredibly low wages that workers receive.

Migrant Workers Reject Deductions

As spelled out in the section above on housing, **65% of migrant workers respondents believe that deductions should be 0%.**

They deduct for everything—housing, insurance, transport. At the end, I barely have money left. — Trinidadian Fishery Worker, Nova Scotia

We deserve a better salary like what they pay the Canadians who work with us even though we work the same or more and they pay us less. - TFW
Mushroom harvester, Mexico, 7 years

Wages and deductions topped the list of grievances during focus groups. Workers reported their income for 15-hour days at low wage rates after deductions for housing, transport, and paperwork, can fall below Canada's legal minimum. Repeated stories described employers offsetting any nominal wage increases by introducing new fees, and cut hours when workers organized for higher pay. Demand for a living wage of at least CAD \$20–25/hour paired with caps or elimination of non-essential deductions—and full access to Employment Insurance including while outside of Canada—was nearly unanimous across groups.

It's ridiculous, it wouldn't be convenient to work here [if charged 30% for housing]. I'd rather stay in Mexico. In this province, the salary isn't very competitive. Things are very expensive. It would be better to earn money in Mexico. - Migrant farm worker from Mexico, working in Nova Scotia

What Migrants Demand

1. **Cap total deductions at 0%** of gross wages, including housing and any service fees.
2. **Prohibit deductions** during non-work and off-season periods.
3. **Guarantee permanent residency** on arrival to remove employer leverage over wages.
4. **Set a minimum wage of at least CAD \$20–25/hour** with guaranteed 40 hours/week while in Canada (not averaged over the season) and transparent deduction practices, preventing wage increases from being offset by new fees.
5. **Full access to Employment Insurance (EI) benefits**, including during off-season periods, while outside Canada.

3.d. Healthcare

Migrant Workers Are Denied Essential Health Services

Migrant workers face systemic barriers to basic healthcare, risking untreated injuries, untreated illnesses, and life-threatening conditions due to employer interference, delayed coverage, language barriers, lack of timely transportation, and high out-of-pocket costs.

I was working for 8 months with an injured arm; the doctor said nothing until my contract ended, then surgery costs fell on me.

SAWP Grape Worker, Niagara, 20 years

A whopping **37.5% of migrant farmworkers report employers denying access to healthcare; of which **7.25%** report being denied access over 10 times.**

How many times has your boss stopped you or someone you know from accessing healthcare?	Response percentage
Never	62.50%
1–2 times	21.05%
3–5 times	7.89%
6–10 times	1.32%
More than 10 times	7.24%

My boss approved or cancelled my appointments—if I pressed it, I'd lose hours.
— TFW Poultry Worker, Ontario, 6 seasons

They send us back to Mexico when we're sick; no guarantees or coverage.
— Migrant Farm Worker, Mexico

In addition to employers denying access, nearly 30% of workers we surveyed faced language barriers accessing healthcare, nearly 20% do not have health cards, and over 15% are unable to get transportation to get to healthcare.

What problems have you faced with healthcare? (Select all that apply)	Response percentage
Language barriers	29.41%
I didn't have a health card	19.85%
I had no way to get to the clinic or hospital	15.44%
I got sick in my home country and had no insurance	8%
I was denied care and didn't know how to complain	5%
I didn't know how to get care	4.41%
I got hurt at work but was told to lie to the doctor	3.68%
My insurance expired or ran out	2.21%

Myself and others applied for health cards & didn't receive any during period of contract work. 8 out of 10 times the health card was delivered late at almost the end of harvest.

The current system creates interjurisdictional inequity across provinces. In Nova Scotia, for example, a worker must hold a one-year work permit to qualify for the provincial Medical Services Insurance program (MSI). Since SAWP contracts are limited to eight months per year, they remain ineligible. In contrast, in provinces like Ontario and Quebec, SAWP workers can have access to public health coverage. This inconsistent coverage means a migrant worker's access to healthcare depends entirely on which province they happen to work in.

My bosses give me medications because they work at a pharmacy, but I never see a doctor.— **Migrant Fishery Worker, New Brunswick**

Agriculture is widely recognized as one of the most hazardous industries in Canada, with fatal injury rates estimated at **15 to 25 per 100,000 workers**⁴. Non-fatal injury rates are also alarmingly high – studies suggest that **5–10% of agricultural workers suffer a work-related injury each year**. Common injuries include musculoskeletal injuries, back and limb strains, falls, cuts, psychological trauma and illness due to chemical exposure and inhalation.

⁴ Canadian Agriculture Injury Reporting. Agriculture-related Fatalities in Canada 1990 – 2020. 2023. https://www.casa-acsa.ca/wp-content/uploads/CAIR_Ag_Fatalities_1990-2020_en_V6.pdf

My boss doesn't allow me to go to the doctor, I had no way to get to the hospital, I didn't know how to receive medical care.

Across all focus groups, healthcare emerged as a top concern, with workers describing long waits for provincial health cards, limited coverage for chronic or workplace injuries, and employer interference in medical care. Many reported waiting one to two months for initial coverage and being denied follow-up appointments when insurers hit cost caps, forcing some to pay out of pocket or return home without support. Participants also noted that diagnoses and test results are often shared first with employers—undermining privacy—and that access to workers' compensation is inconsistent, leaving injured workers without lost-time pay or guaranteed treatment. Workers reported during the focus groups that more often than not, their pain and symptoms are dismissed as stress or tension, with no basic diagnostic tests done and no treatment provided beyond the suggestion of taking pain medication and time off work.

I got sick with my vision, so I went to the eye doctor. This happened before returning to my country, because my contract expired, and the following season the employer decided not to renew my contract, so I didn't continue with the treatment. Supervisor said it's because I went to the doctor.

I have seen workers who are sick being sent to Mexico. Once they arrive in Mexico, it is up to them to sort things out as best they can. We have no guarantees of anything. On the part of the government, the consulate, and the farms, we are objects, not human beings. - Migrant farm worker from Mexico, working in Nova Scotia

ESDC's Healthcare Proposal:

1. All employers are encouraged to provide basic private health plans from Day 1.
2. Employers would be barred from recouping these premiums from worker pay.
3. Employers must assist workers in registering for provincial health plans as soon as any waiting period ends, and maintain continuous coverage if a worker transfers between employers before public coverage kicks in.
4. Considering requiring mandatory workplace-safety insurance for all farm and processing sites, regardless of whether local law currently imposes it.

What Migrant Workers Want

79% demand immediate public coverage unlinked to employers.

Pain is not a part of the job; without day-one coverage, we suffer in silence.
— Focus Group Participant, BC

What Migrants Demand

- **Immediate access to health coverage and health cards upon arrival**, to address acute injuries and chronic occupational illnesses, including calling on provinces to waive residency wait-times.
- **Ensure at least 12 paid sick days and transportation to healthcare** so that migrant workers are not restricted from getting care.
- **Ban employer interference**: legally prohibit employer involvement in appointment scheduling, medical records, and results.
- **Eliminate private-insurance deductions**: public plans must cover the full range of necessary treatments, including mental health and pandemic response.
- **Universal workplace-safe insurance and compensation**: Ensure migrant workers have access to care after injury including upon return to home country.
- **Extension of healthcare coverage to dependents in home countries** and assurance that private insurers (e.g., Cowan) cover essential medications without employer interference.
- **Mandatory death insurance coverage**: All employers must obtain insurance that covers the full costs of a worker's death, including local burial in Canada or repatriation of remains to the home country, depending on family wishes. Coverage must include 100% of associated expenses—transportation of the body, funeral service costs, documentation, and transport for personal effects—with no family ever having to choose between crushing debt or abandoning their loved one's remains abroad.

3.e. Transportation

Migrant Workers Are Paying for Travel

Migrant workers incur significant travel-related expenses just to start and maintain employment in Canada. Beyond employer-covered airfare, workers pay for commutes to the departure cities, hotel stays, high-priced food during transit, and occasionally for travel from major hubs in Canada to employers' homes.

Survey respondents reported a median cost of **\$880 per trip to Canada for travel and transportation, separate from airline flights, and some reported paying much higher costs.**

I paid \$2,200 last year just to get here. By the time I arrived, I owed more than I earned.

Filipino Fishery Worker, British Columbia

Nearly half the workers complained of not being able to choose flights that worked with their schedules and priorities. Nearly **20% respondents reported having to pay for buses and taxis** for travel; and **12% having to pay for food and accommodations during transit**.

Taxis to the airport, baggage fees, hotels—it's like they gave me a job and a debt. – Jamaican SAWP Worker, Ontario

Employers often buy more expensive flights that workers have to pay for via deductions. 16% reported needing to pay for flights home despite it being an employer responsibility. 5% said that they were not allowed to take checked baggage with them despite having paid for it (as employers provide transport from housing to the airport and refuse to provide sufficient space for workers luggage). Transportation costs were uniformly seen as unfair deductions that erode already low earnings during focus groups.

Have you faced any of these travel problems?	Response Percentage
I couldn't choose my flight	47.20%
I had to take bus/taxi to get to work in Canada	19.60%
Boss sends us home early without notice	18.40%
I had to pay for my flight home	16.00%
I had to pay for food/hotels during transit	12.00%
My boss chose expensive flights	8.33%
My boss is not letting me take home a checked luggage, even if I paid for it	4.80%

Transportation Proposal: Focus on distributing costs

ESDC outlines four illustrative, non-mandatory cost-sharing models intended to distribute travel costs among employers:

1. **Centrally Managed Pool:** Employers pay a flat per-worker fee covering round-trip airfare and a fixed allowance for intra-/interprovincial transfers, administered by a designated body.
2. **Sequential Cost-Sharing:** The first employer covers the initial airfare; the second covers transfers and return flights.
3. **Pro-Rata Split:** Overall travel cost is divided by total contract days; each employer pays according to days worked.
4. **Reimbursement Model:** A new employer reimburses the previous employer for initial travel costs, then covers any subsequent transfers.

Under all models, ESDC recommends advance bookings to avoid surcharges and proposes a 14-day grace period for unemployed workers to find new contracts before return flights are purchased.

ESDC Proposal Neglects Migrant Worker Needs

The ESDC proposal does not respond to migrant workers' main issues - which are lack of control over travel; having to pay for flights, other transportations, food and accommodations while in transit.

Workers across sectors insisted that employers must cover all travel including hotels, buses/taxis, in-transit accommodations and other expenses. Many contrasted their dependence on employer-controlled travel with the autonomy of choosing other local transport options.

Crucially, all workers in focus groups insisted on the need for rules on local transportation while in Canada to buy groceries, access healthcare, and for social and personal needs. Workers are reliant on employer-controlled shuttles, or bicycles with very limited access to public transportation.

What Migrants Demand

- **Require employers to assume** all travel expenses, without deducting anything from migrant workers' pay.
- **Require that employers cover all travel costs** including hotels, meals, and ground transportation from their hometown to the departing airport and from arriving airport to final destination.

- **Provide free access to local transportation** for groceries, healthcare, and social needs
- **Allow migrant workers to choose their flights** and travel arrangements.