



June 28, 2017

Joint Committee on Public Safety & Homeland Security  
Massachusetts State House  
24 Beacon Street  
Rooms 167 & 109B  
Boston, MA 02133

RE: Safe Communities Act Testimony (Senate Bill Number 1305, House Bill Number 3269)

Dear Chair Naughton and members of the Committee,

Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA) is submitting this written testimony in strong support of the Safe Communities Act. For 24 years, CISA has worked to strengthen local farms and engage the community to build the local food economy. We are based in South Deerfield and work with over 270 farms and 160 local food businesses in Franklin, Hampshire, and Hampden counties, in addition to working across the Commonwealth in partnership with other organizations.

Our support for the Safe Communities Act rests on the importance of foreign-born workers in agriculture among other sectors of our local food economy, including restaurants, specialty producers, distributors, and wholesalers. Many farms in our region, as in much of the rest of the country, rely on foreign-born workers to plant, tend, and harvest their crops. Agriculture has relied on immigrant workers for decades, but federal immigration policy does not recognize the importance of these workers and has failed to create options for legal status and citizenship. In the absence of federal solutions to these decades-old problems, the Safe Communities Act provides an opportunity for action at the state level to demonstrate respect and to protect workers, employers, and communities in our Commonwealth.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor's most recent National Agricultural Workers Survey, 72% of all workers on crop farms in the country are foreign-born, and 46% are undocumented. Farms are by no means alone among local businesses in relying on foreign-born and undocumented workers. In fact, national census data indicates that only 4% of the eight million undocumented immigrants in the United States are farmworkers, while 32% of all undocumented immigrants work in the service industry and 16% work in construction.

Farm owners rely on foreign-born workers because farm work is physically demanding, jobs are often seasonal, and profit margins and pay rates are low. American-born workers are increasingly reluctant to do farm work, and while many farm owners would like to pay their employees more, they find themselves limited by an intensely competitive, price-sensitive market for food. One farmer told us that he advertised for workers as far south as Hartford and as far west as Albany, as well as throughout the Pioneer Valley, and received no responses to his ad. We have heard time and again from farmers about their reliance on foreign-born

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workers, who bring agricultural skills and experience and a willingness to work long hours in heat, cold, or rain. Many farmers have long-term relationships with their workers, whose depth of knowledge about their farms, and their systems and crops, is invaluable.

Our local farms produce fresh and delicious food, contribute to the local economy, pay taxes, and protect open space. Several farmers have told us that challenges related to farm labor, including the current immigration climate, are the greatest threat to their business. Each year, farmers take a leap of faith: planting, fertilizing, and weeding crops that will be ready for harvest and sale in weeks or months if the weather cooperates. Uncertainty about whether workers will be available to tend and harvest crops makes a risky business even riskier.

In addition, we share the grave concerns of many farmers about the health and well-being of their farmworkers, their families, and their communities. Many authorized workers have friends and relatives who are undocumented, and a 2011 Census-based report indicated that nationwide, nine million people live in “mixed status” families where one or more family members are in the country legally while others are undocumented. Our communities suffer if some residents are unwilling to interact with public safety officials or the health and educational systems because of fear of deportation. One local farmworker has lived in this country for over 20 years. His two children are citizens who are students in the local public schools. This farmworker’s family lives in fear that they will be separated from each other without warning as a result of a simple traffic stop or other routine interaction with local law enforcement. We rely on farmworkers to grow our food, and we should not force them to live in fear of deportation and separation from family members.

We support the Safe Communities Act because it:

- Provides farm and other business owners with greater confidence in the stability of their workforce;
- Diminishes the fear felt by many farmworkers and their families;
- Ensures that all residents of our region are given basic constitutional protections and due process;
- Improves the safety of our communities by ensuring that workers are not afraid to interact with the police or with the health care or educational systems;
- Ensures that local and state tax dollars are used to protect local communities, not to carry out federal immigration activities; and,
- Complies with federal law.

Thank you for your careful review of our testimony. We urge you to favorably vote Senate Bill 1305 and House Bill 3269 out of committee and to work to assure its swift passage by the Legislature.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Philip S. Korman", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Philip S. Korman  
Executive Director