

Forum looks at the plight of migrant workers

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There's not much evidence of a migrant population in Rochester. But not too far away from the city is a large population of people who, while providing a vital service to our nation's food industry, have few rights and live in fear of being plucked away at any moment.

As migrant workers continue to be deported in New York state, farms are struggling to have enough workers.

Monday evening, the League of Women Voters held a forum for people close to western New York's immigrant population to discuss the issue. They called for meaningful immigration reform that would both allow farmers to have enough hands and migrant workers to have basic rights. The federal government is currently discussing reform, and a bill in the state Legislature is close to having enough support, advocates Monday evening said.

Immigration reform has been a key issue for the League since 2008. Their stance is that the policy should allow for immediate families to be reunited, economic needs to be met in the United States, be responsive to those facing political persecution or humanitarian crises, allow people to enter on student visa, and fair treatment for all.

Reverend Chava Redonnet is the chaplain of the Church of Oscar Romero in Wayne County, which serves migrant workers. She recounted tales of parishioners being deported then again crossing the border on foot, making their way to upstate New York.

After being caught, some wound up in an alternatives to detention system

 , which allowed them to stay free and in the U.S. but involved burdensome trips to Buffalo, court dates and home visits.

"Every other week for 18 months we drove them to Buffalo for a 10-minute meeting so they could prove they were doing everything they had to do," she said.

People being taken is hurting the community, and placing stress on those that remain.

"Their ranks just keep getting thinned by people who are getting deported," Redonnet said. "There aren't as many people working, so those that are left are working that much harder."

Reverend Richard Witt, director of the Rural and Migrant Ministry, said farm workers have been left out of labor standards that protect other classifications of workers.

"They're excluded from basic rights such as a day of rest. They're excluded from overtime, collective bargaining and disability insurance," Witt said. Migrant workers, afraid of deportation, wouldn't engage in the political discussion.

"It's really hard to get people's voices heard when they're terrified for their own safety," he said.

John Ghertner of the Greater Rochester Coalition for Immigration Justice, said dairy farms are impacted by the combination of stringent laws and fear among the migrants.

“It puts extreme economic stress on the farms,” he said.