

## **Introduction**

### **The problem:**

Agricultural workers, many of whom immigrated from Central America and Mexico to work in the agricultural district Homestead, Florida, are subject to specific environmental risks due to the work they do and their marginal social position. Those risks include heat stress and the cumulative health effects of chronic pesticide exposure.

### **The roots:**

The Homestead agricultural district, originally Everglades land, was brought under cultivation in the early 20th century to supply winter fruits and vegetables to the northern states. Local agricultural practice depends heavily on chemical fertilizer, pesticides, and herbicides to offset the humid tropical climate, thin soils, and year-round pests. Recent competition from Latin American produce has led Homestead growers to shift their crops to ornamental landscape plants that require even more low-paid hand labor. The long-term effects of exposure to agricultural chemicals include fetal deformities, cancers, and neurological damage. Workers in the fields and in greenhouses are also exposed to summer heat stress, now exacerbated by climate change.

The Homestead agricultural district has long depended on immigrant labor. Temporary laborers from Mexico were recruited to work in South Florida beginning in the 1940s. In the 1990s and early 2000s, political and environmental disruptions in Central America (including Hurricane Mitch in 1998, the civil wars in El Salvador and a devastating 2001 Earthquake there) impelled immigration to the United States from the “Northern Triangle” of Central America, with South Florida agricultural fields a frequent destination. Some Salvadoran immigrants from this era received Temporary Protected Status due to the gravity of the conditions in their countries of origin. However, that program is currently under threat. Since 2001, drought in Central America linked to climate change has increasingly compromised local agriculture, leaving workers with little choice but to immigrate. Some arrive in Homestead without legal status, leaving them subject to abusive conditions, extremely low wages, and even wage theft. They are also hesitant to seek medical care, report problems such as pesticide exposure and heat stress to authorities, or to advocate for themselves in the workplace or in the broader political arena.

### **The solutions:**

WeCount! was organized in 2006 as an education, advocacy and empowerment organization serving Latin American immigrants and farm workers around Homestead. WeCount! empowers immigrant workers by providing training in occupational safety and health and immigrant and workers’ rights, as well as courses in English, Spanish and computer literacy, and workshops in leadership and political education.

WeCount!’s approach is effectively encapsulated in the organization’s name. By banding together, organizing each other, and educating each other, marginalized immigrant workers can amplify their voices, improve their working conditions, and win greater rights.

WeCount!'s educational work and their political organizing therefore go hand in hand. WeCount! works principally at the state and local levels, advocating directly to employers on behalf of workers for improved wages and working conditions, and advocating for immigrant worker rights at the state and local government levels. 2019 has been a disappointing year for state-level legislation. Despite WeCount! advocacy, a proposed Heat Illness Prevention Act, was stopped in committee. "Anti-Sanctuary" legislation was also passed, which requires local police to support immigration enforcement in Florida. Both bills deny basic rights to some immigrant workers and instill fears of increased harassment and heightened deportation risk.

**Our work:**

"Somos los olvidados"/ "We are the forgotten ones." A comment by Marta, one of our partners from WeCount! frames the work of our interdisciplinary class of architecture students and English literature majors. The class combined academic research on the climate and political contexts of agricultural workers' emigration north from the Northern Triangle of Central America and rural Mexico with discussions with activists working with Homestead workers, and interviews conducted with the workers themselves to gather material to narrate their stories. Using our skills as architects to render spatial stories (by drawing *with* our partners), and English students adept at creating literary narrative and incorporating material from diverse sources, alongside our community's bilingual English-Spanish context, we developed individual pamphlet-length illustrated histories of our partners' stories. we presented the booklets to our partners over a celebratory dinner and we show them here.