

## Relief drive amasses clothing to protect farm workers from pesticides

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The photo stunned readers of *The Florida Catholic*: A Central Florida farm worker wore blue jeans, a bandanna tied at her chin, a sweater around her waist, a long-sleeve shirt, a short-sleeve shirt over it and long rubber gloves, pinched together at the forearm to prevent chemicals from touching her skin.

Many were unaware that field workers go to great lengths to shield themselves not only from the sun, but also from pesticides.

The photo spurred a campaign, begun by the newspaper on Ash Wednesday and ending on Easter Sunday, to get field-appropriate clothing to farm workers, who often replace their shirts every few days because they become tainted with chemicals.

The Lenten drive, called "Long-Sleeve Relief," has gathered hundreds of shirts from Catholic parishioners and school children. Boxes are overflowing with collared shirts, flannel shirts, pullovers and new shirts with tags still attached.

"It might seem like a small thing, but people don't realize how difficult the physical conditions are," said Nancy Powers, farm worker consultant to the Florida Catholic Conference.

An estimated 150,000- 200,000 Florida farm workers plant, weed, stake and pick fruits, vegetables and flowers throughout the year. While their status as legal or illegal immigrants has captured the attention of the nation because of bills under debate in Congress, their working conditions get little notice, Powers said.

The Farmworker Coordinating Council of Palm Beach County, with offices in Lake Worth and Belle Glade, has donation rooms that field workers can pick through each Thursday, program director Jorge Gomez said. Long-sleeve shirts usually are the first clothes to go, he said.

St. Matthew Catholic Church in Lake Worth has collected more than 300 shirts, said Gina Garroway, director of religious education. Volunteers will deliver them to St. Mary Catholic Church in Pahokee, she said.

At Archbishop McCarthy High School in Southwest Ranches, students became intrigued by the campaign as they learned about migrant-worker justice issues, theology teacher Michaela Ecker said.

"They get frustrated that they hear about all these problems and there is little they can do," Ecker said. "If they bring in just one shirt, they can feel like they have done something for someone."

The students will deliver the shirts in Immokalee, a farming community in Central Florida, on April 29.

Collections are ongoing at 25 churches and 18 schools, and several will continue after Easter, said Mary St. Pierre, managing editor of *The Florida Catholic*.

### PHOTO



Employee Veronica Zavala straightens up donated clothing