



U.S. & World

N.B. & Canada

Moncton

Saint John

Fredericton

Miramichi

COVID-19

## Prioritize safety of migrant workers, advocates say



Raluca Bejan, assistant professor of social work at Dalhousie University, says she's concerned the conditions faced by temporary foreign workers are being ignored.

Photo: Submitted



© Published 12 hours ago

---

**David Gordon Koch | Times & Transcript**

---

The safety and well-being of migrant workers should be top-of-mind as seafood and farming companies grapple with new travel restrictions prompted by COVID-19, advocates for temporary foreign workers say.

The cancellation of flights to Mexico and the Caribbean has created headaches for businesses that rely on thousands of essential workers who travel annually to Canada.

Raluca Bejan, assistant professor of social work at Dalhousie University, says she's concerned the conditions faced by temporary foreign workers are being ignored, even as they face new dangers and worsened conditions caused by the global pandemic.

"The issue with the new travel restrictions is that the problem gets again framed solely from the perspective of farmers and seafood processors," she said in an email.

"The entire conversation is geared towards the interests of the industry. The question we should be asking is – 'How are we able to protect the workers we bring in?'"

Bejan is part of a new research project prompted by the COVID-19 crisis, which aims to study the health and safety of temporary foreign workers in the region.

The project, dubbed Migrant Workers in the Canadian Maritimes,

is coordinated between Dalhousie University, St. Thomas University and the Charlottetown-based Cooper Institute, she said. Researchers have interviewed 15 migrant workers on P.E.I., and research is underway in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, she said. Temporary foreign workers on P.E.I. and elsewhere in the country have faced issues including more restrictions on their movements and have been "penalized heavily for venturing out," said Ann Wheatley of the Cooper Institute.

Wheatley said many people are scared of speaking out, causing them to "endure situations that are bad for physical and mental health."

Bejan said preliminary findings from P.E.I. include COVID-19 measures that have been "inconsistently implemented" and housing that she described as overcrowded and "inadequate."

She added that "workers are battling not only precarious health and occupational conditions but also illegal recruitment practices, where much of the 'working' costs are downloaded to the workers themselves."

Nat Richard, executive director of Lobster Processors Association, disputed their findings, though he acknowledged abuses documented elsewhere in the country.

"If we didn't provide adequate working and living conditions, year in and year out, I don't think a lot of [temporary foreign workers]

would be coming back," Richard said.

He added that companies invested millions of dollars in COVID-19 safety measures.

The regional seafood industry brings in some 2,500 temporary foreign workers in a normal year – fewer came in 2020 – from countries such as Mexico, the Philippines and Jamaica, he said.

Syed Hussan of the Toronto-based Migrant Workers Alliance for Change said Wednesday the group is aware of six or seven outbreaks among temporary foreign workers on Canadian farms or food processing facilities.

But since migrant workers are present in many sectors, it's impossible to track all cases of COVID-19, he said.

Hussan said the workers are dealing with new expenses related to travel and COVID-19 testing, causing workers to go into debt.

He said unforeseen expenses for Mexican workers add up to roughly \$800, and some resort to loan sharks, making them more reluctant to assert their rights in Canada, he said.

"This is \$800 these people don't have," he said.

Hussan added they face new dangers as they travel, sometimes up to 12 hours by bus, from rural Mexican communities to clinics for mandatory COVID-19 testing before their departure.

He said the process causes them "enormous strife," noting they sometimes catch COVID-19 after leaving communities insulated from the virus.

He called for financial assistance for temporary foreign workers on par with support available for Canadian workers, if they can't travel safely, and renewed long-standing calls for migrant workers to obtain permanent status upon arrival.

Three migrant workers – Juan López Chaparro, Bonifacio Eugenio Romero and Rogelio Santos Muñoz – have died of COVID-19 in Canada, according to Hussan.