

Hispanic Impact

Highlighting Latinos in Ohio

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Maria Goeser:

It Begins at the Farms and Fields: Recognizing our Farm and Migrant Labor

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As you travel the state, soybean, corn, wheat and hay fields color the landscape and this is because Ohio is a national leader in the production of field crops, vegetables, fruits and livestock. In 2016, Ohio had an estimated 10,000 Latino/Hispanic workers who contributed to Ohio's agricultural market value which surpassed 10 billion dollars. Through Ohio's Job and Family Services Farm Labor Office, the State seeks to assist, support and engage these workers. Today, we speak to Maria Goeser about her work as Ohio's State Monitor Advocate for Migrant and Seasonal Workers and what it means to be among those who work the land and produce the food in Ohio. Join us for the conversation!



“I believe it’s a privilege to assist people who work so hard and who are doing the strenuous labor to put food on our tables.”

Tell me about yourself, and your trajectory in state government.

I've been with the State for 28 ½ years, presently as the State Monitor Advocate (SMA) a position I started in June of 2014 at the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services in the Office of Workforce Development. My position as the SMA is to support the needs of the Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers (MSFWs). My focus is to review services offered, report my findings and make recommendations to include advocating for the MSFWs. For example, if there is a change in the migration of MSFWs to an area in Ohio, I may recommend to relocate an outreach worker to that area or possibly post a position to hire a new outreach worker in that area. If services for the MSFWs are not in compliance with Federal Regulations, I'll recommend a corrective and remedial action to resolve issues to keep Ohio in compliance. I also collect information and data about the MSFWs needs, characteristics, and concerns to improve provisional services for them. I will collaborate with a broad range of stakeholders, including community and employer-based organizations, FALCON Group in NW Ohio, The Latino Connection in Dayton, Ohio, Latino Coalitions of Clark, and Champaign Counties and the Latino/Hispanic Collaboration in Franklin County. I ensure that the MSFWs are serviced equitably at the Ohio Means Jobs Centers through job referrals, trainings and other supportive services. As the SMA, I have the role to handle MSFW complaints and monitor the Complaint System, ensuring that all legal protections are afforded to the MSFWs and that their complaints are properly resolved. Each year, I write an Annual Summary of Employment Services to MSFWs to summarize the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services delivery of employment and training services to MSFWs via Ohio's local workforce system, and the services provided by the migrant outreach workers.

What lead you down the path to be a SMA and why is this an important role?

I come from a family of Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers. Hence, providing protection, a system for feedback and upholding the rights for everyone – especially the vulnerable Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers, is an important mission for me. In 1989, I moved from Southern Texas back to my home state of Ohio, to take a job with the state as a Migrant Outreach Specialist. During this training time, I got to know about the services to the MSFWs and how their work was very physical: working in the cold, rain, heat and dry conditions. While working in the Southwest region of Ohio, I was fortunate to meet some amazing agency partners who thought like I did, that we were chosen to

do this mission of helping and assisting the Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers. I consider myself very blessed, because I was given the opportunity to work with such great people whom I am proud to call my friends. In 1996, I was promoted to a customer service representative position for a very short time and this gave me the opportunity to learn the unemployment system. In turn, I could help the MSFWs at the end of the season to apply for unemployment compensation. In 1997, I was promoted to an Account Executive position working with employers, chambers of commerce, and economic developers. I've always kept the welfare of migrants in my mind because once you're in this service you can never divorce yourself from it. The trust and confidence that you build with the Migrant and Seasonal Farmworker families are forever. So, in 2014 I was blessed to make a full circle and come back to my roots and passion - working completely with the services to MSFWs that travel to Ohio.



Other SMAs



Presenting a certificate of recognition for assisting farmworkers to the St. Teresa Latino Festival

As a SMA, what do you think people should know about the work Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services and the Office of Workforce Development?

I wish people would know and understand that we are here to help the agricultural employer find qualified workers. We work with a variety of partner agencies to help the MSFWs find employment, giving them a hand up not a handout. We help workers through job referrals, resume assistance, interviewing techniques, support services, apprenticeship programs and veteran services. People should know that a Migrant and Seasonal Farmworker can leave the fields and transition to year-round employment through our services, and that we provide at the end of the growing season information to assist the migrant and seasonal farmworker with unemployment compensation. I believe it's a privilege to assist workers who work so hard and who are doing the strenuous labor to put food on our tables.

Who have you met while working as a SMA?

I have met a lot of very awesome people. One example is Juan Regalado, Our National Monitor Advocate, based in San Francisco, California, and his national monitor advocate team. Another is Ray Garcia, my Regional Monitor Advocate in Chicago—Illinois, what an exceptional group of individuals! There are also 50 SMAs across the nation and I've had the privilege and honor to work with a majority of them, especially with our neighboring states, Michigan, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Indiana because we share at times the same Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers. I believe the entire Monitoring Advocate team are very dedicated and passionate individuals, they believe in what they do and advocate for the rights of the migrant and seasonal farm workers. I have also worked with partner agencies within Ohio and other states advocating for the Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers. Most importantly our migrant outreach

specialists who work tirelessly to assist the MSFWs and agriculture employers, this group of outreach workers, they are the ones that really make it happen.

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NMA, and SMA's in D.C.

Did you have any key mentors or people who deeply influenced you?

Definitely, my Mom and Dad! We were a family of seven, and they taught us right from wrong, to have a strong faith, to be compassionate, and always give 100%. My husband Martin and our three daughters Rachel, Megan and Sarah inspire me as well. They all have careers in helping and assisting people in need, and understand as well as share my love and compassion for the Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers.

What would you say most motivates you in your job?

My greatest motivation is the satisfaction of knowing that I helped someone, and being able to be there and make a difference in someone's life. Knowing that you've made a difference is impactful. When someone from several years ago reminds you that you helped them find a job, or they finished their education and are successful, this is very rewarding to me and fuels me to continue to help and assist those less fortunate.

What are the skills that empower you and how did you learn those skills?

I learned good work ethics from my parents. They taught us how to work hard, to be honest, and to be trustworthy and to listen. Listening skills are very important; being able to communicate and being able to be there as a mentor. I find that there are always two sides to a story and you must listen and be able to communicate well. In this line of work, things tend to escalate. However, you will find that if you would just wait a moment, you will get to the truth. The issue could be caused by lack of understanding or a breakdown in communication. So just by sitting down and listening, nine times out of ten the situation may take care of itself.

What has been the biggest obstacles in your life and how did you overcome them?

Juggling both family and work. You can't work to live, you have to be able to live to be able to work. For example, in the middle of my career, I had a grandson who developed liver cancer at 12 months. It was like my world ended. Through prayer warriors, my faith in God, great doctors at Children's Hospital and never giving up hope, our miracle is going to be 12 years old this August. That time in my life taught me what was really important in life – my family, my work family and my friends. I learned to put my life in

perspective, that you must enjoy life – live life to its fullest, because you never know about tomorrow.

What might someone be surprised to know about you?

When I started working for the state of Ohio in 1989, my manager nominated me for employee of the month in 1991, and I was selected! It was very exciting. We had a big celebration at our Central Office and I was so honored. The following year, because of this honor, I became one of 12 candidates being considered for employee of the year! I won the 1992 employee of the year for the Ohio Bureau of Employment Services!

What's next for you in your work, what are you looking forward to?

Retirement! In 18 months I hope to retire after 30 years with the State of Ohio. I want to say that I've done my tour of public service and completed it, and just hope to hand over the baton to the next advocate. However, I am going to continue to help migrant families, as it's my life's calling. Like I said before, once you begin working in this service, you can never divorce yourself from the work. You are connected forever, because there is always someone going to need your assistance. Besides, who are we if we can't help our fellow brother or sister?



In The Field