

The Oregonian

Clinic brings health care to vineyards

Salud offers low-cost preventive care to workers in Oregon's wine industry

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The state's wine-grape harvest is only a week or so away, meaning the thousands of field hands responsible for a successful vintage have precious few moments for anything but work.

But Fernando Ramirez, along with more than 50 other vineyard workers, found time Thursday to attend to something even more important: his health.

The 21-year-old tractor driver wasn't about to pass up the season's last chance to get a free health screening and check-up made possible by a program widely considered to be the only one of its kind in the country.

"I feel I'm pretty healthy," said Ramirez, speaking in his native Spanish. "But this is the only health care I get. I knew I needed to get here today."

The free or near-free care is offered by Salud, a 15-year-old partnership between Oregon vineyard and winery owners and Tuality Healthcare Foundation in Hillsboro.

Final tallies are expected to show that nearly 3,000 vineyard workers and their families received medical and dental care this year, said Leda Garside, Salud's senior nursing supervisor. That will easily exceed the 2,200 who got care last year, which in turn saw a 40 percent increase over 2004.

Spectacular growth in the state's wine industry over the past decade has resulted in more and more acres planted in grapes. The number of commercial wineries and winery sales figures both more than doubled during that span.

One result of that growth has been the dramatically increasing numbers of field hands looking for work. There is, however, a glaring snag in all of that success.

Most Oregon wineries offer their full-time employees both health care and retirement benefits. But that number constitutes only a fraction of the work force needed to complete critical seasonal tasks such as pruning, leafing and harvest.

Even the most compassionate winery owner has no effective way of offering comprehensive health care to the remaining contract workers, who may work the vineyards for only three months before moving on to Christmas trees or other agricultural commodities, said Adam Campbell, owner and winemaker at Elk Cove Vineyards in Gaston.

Salud, said Buddy Beck, a longtime vineyard manager and owner of Advanced Vineyard Systems in McMinnville, is often the only option to offer prevention-based health care to those seasonal vineyard workers.

"These are people who tend to fall through the cracks in terms of health care," Beck said. "But their services

are absolutely essential to our industry."

At a clinic last week near the tiny Yamhill town of Carlton, for instance, a 54-year-old vineyard worker showed up for treatment, Garside said. Upon further questioning, the man complained of excessive thirst, recent weight loss and tingling in his limbs.

A blood sample, tested on site, turned up a positive diagnosis for diabetes, a condition the man didn't know he had, she said.

"We're now referring him to an appropriate clinic, where the physicians offer us their services almost for free," Garside said. "If his condition hadn't been diagnosed now," she said, "just imagine how many more dollars his care would have required later on."

Garside and her crew of nurses and volunteers, working out of a specially equipped RV that racked up 22 days of travel to more than 50 vineyards this year, take blood-pressure readings, draw blood samples for diabetes and cholesterol screenings, and offer brief seminars on pre-natal care and ailments such as heart disease and arthritis.

Much of the money to finance the program is raised at two fine-wine auctions, held on back-to-back days in November. They are highlighted by silent and oral auctions, during which wine lovers bid on specially blended barrels of pinot noir crafted solely for the events.

The amount of money raised by the auctions, as much as the recent increases in grape plantings and sales volume, underscores a successful and growing industry. Two years ago, for instance, the auctions generated \$482,490, said Maria McCandless, who manages the Tuality Healthcare Foundation.

In 2005, that amount soared to \$708,670, she said.

"With that money, we can leverage anywhere from five to 10 times that amount in health care services, thanks to the generosity of the participating clinics and physicians," she said. "Sometimes, even more."

Noted Oregon winemaker Ken Wright, a co-founder of Salud, said wine aficionados unfamiliar with the Salud auctions need to start paying attention.

"Salud is the only opportunity anyone has to acquire the very best wine in the cellars of the 42 best wineries in the state," he said. "If someone wants something very special that can't be acquired anywhere else, Salud is the place to get it."

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