

Spotlight Brief

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Unemployment Insurance Navigators Serving Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers

Findings from Wisconsin and New Mexico



This spotlight brief is part of a study funded by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), Chief Evaluation Office, that explores the implementation of [Unemployment Insurance \(UI\) Navigator grants](#), which seven states received in 2022. The DOL's Employment and Training Administration funded these three-year competitive grants, which are aimed at supporting efforts to promote equitable access to UI benefits, with American Rescue Plan Act funds. In summer and fall 2023, the study team conducted interviews with UI Navigator grantees and subgrantees during site visits to 5 of the 7 grantee states and with 20 select participants who received UI Navigator services. This brief is based on the interviews conducted in New Mexico and Wisconsin. Visit the [Navigator Evidence-Building Portfolio](#) website for additional information about the study's design and related publications. A full study report will be available in early 2025.

Who are migrant and seasonal farmworkers?

Migrant and seasonal farmworkers are agricultural workers who are employed in a seasonal or temporary nature, and who may travel from their state residence to find seasonal employment. Migrant agricultural workers are noted as a distinct group of seasonal agricultural workers in that they are required to be absent overnight from their permanent place of residence (Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act 1986). Due to the intermittent nature of farm work, 7 in 10 U.S. farmworkers reported at least one period in

the last year without employment (Gold et al. 2022).¹ During periods of unemployment, many migrant workers are categorically ineligible for UI benefits because of their citizenship or work authorization status, although an estimated 56 percent of farmworkers have proper work authorization (Gold et al. 2022). All undocumented immigrant workers are ineligible for UI, and the work authorization for those who have it must have been valid during the time the individual was working, at the time they apply for benefits, and throughout their claiming period (Smith 2020).

¹ Respondents to this survey are randomly sampled and may include both documented and undocumented immigrant farmworkers. For more information see:

<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/national-agricultural-workers-survey/methodology>.

What are common barriers they face to receiving UI benefits?

For migrant and seasonal farmworkers who meet all the eligibility requirements to receive UI benefits, many still face several distinct barriers to applying for and receiving benefits, including: 1) language barriers; 2) complexity of claim filing due to earning wages in multiple states; 3) cultural barriers; and 4) educational barriers.

Language barriers

According to recent estimates from the National Agricultural Workers Survey, 62 percent of farmworkers indicated Spanish was the language they are most comfortable conversing in (Gold et al. 2022). These workers may have limited English proficiency and literacy, which could make it difficult for them to read or interpret official UI communications, or to speak with UI staff in person or over the phone, in English. As a UI Navigator in Wisconsin put it, “Even in Spanish it can be difficult to explain...what is a job search?”

Earning wages in multiple states

An estimated 15 percent of all U.S. farmworkers are migrant workers who may work for part of the year—and earn sufficient wages to be eligible for UI benefits—in a state that is not their primary state of residence (Gold et al. 2022). Navigators in both Wisconsin and New Mexico noted that these workers may not know in which state they should apply for benefits, or even if they are eligible for benefits because of their travel between states. A state administrator in Wisconsin reported that determining the correct state for filing for UI is the most common claims issue for migrant and seasonal farmworkers. An administrator at Wisconsin’s UI Navigator subgrantee organization, United Migrant Opportunity Services (UMOS; see Box 1 below), noted that participants use UMOS services in both Texas and Wisconsin because they travel between the states during the year. A UI

Navigator in New Mexico also recounted, for example, that one participant thought they may be ineligible for UI benefits because they worked in one state and resided in another.

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“I recently helped a farmworker who had to file for unemployment in Texas, even though he [lives] in New Mexico and had worked in Texas and Oklahoma. Sometimes they think they’re going to lose their [UI] benefits even if they’re eligible.”

UI Navigator in New Mexico

Cultural barriers

Cultural differences between countries lead some migrant and seasonal farmworkers to believe they are not eligible for UI benefits. A UI Navigator at UMOS noted that Navigators need to spend a lot of time explaining UI as a program, since countries, such as Mexico and Honduras, do not have public unemployment benefit programs (OECD 2020; US Department of State 2021).

Box 1: United Migrant Opportunity Services

[UMOS](#) is the sole subgrantee implementing UI Navigator services in Wisconsin under the UI Navigator grant. UMOS is a national nonprofit advocacy organization with over 50 years of experience in providing services to migrant and seasonal farmworkers. UMOS’s corporate headquarters are in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, but the organization operates across 65 locations in seven states. According to the UI Navigator grant manager in Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development chose UMOS to implement the grant due to its good reputation, presence throughout Wisconsin, and strong connections to the communities and populations they serve.

Educational barriers

Navigators in both states noted that some participants may struggle to read and write in *any* language because they have had little education. An administrator at UMOS in Wisconsin noted that among this population, “Education levels might impede confidence in completing the application process for UI benefits,” as UI communications and materials demand a high reading level. State staff in both Wisconsin and New Mexico noted recent efforts by their UI programs, separate from the UI Navigator grants, to simplify language used in claimant handbooks and official communications, but could not speak to the effectiveness of these efforts in improving reading comprehension.

How do UI Navigators help to remove these barriers?

UI Navigators in Wisconsin and New Mexico aim to help to remove barriers for these farmworkers to receiving UI benefits by providing language translation and assistance, as well as intensive one-on-one support informed by their lived experience

Box 2: Community Health Workers in New Mexico

New Mexico plans for its UI Navigators to be current or former [community health workers](#) (CHWs) (NIH 2014). CHWs are public health professionals who promote public health and well-being in the communities they serve and may work for regional health networks, hospital systems, or nonprofit organizations. The New Mexico Department of Workforce Solutions chose to partner with CHWs for the UI Navigator grant because CHWs are trusted members of the communities they serve and they have a strong history of working with populations facing barriers to public services such as migrant and seasonal farmworkers.

and unique connections to the communities they serve (see Box 2 on community health workers in New Mexico, below).

Language skills and assistance

In both states, UI Navigators help workers apply for UI benefits by offering translation and interpretation assistance. UMOS prioritized hiring bilingual Navigators to help meet the language needs of migrant and seasonal farmworkers, with seven of nine UI Navigators hired by UMOS in Wisconsin fluent in both Spanish and English. State UI and workforce staff in Wisconsin feel that the ability of UI Navigators to communicate with participants in their preferred language is crucial to effectively serving migrant and seasonal farmworkers. A state administrator in Wisconsin noted that UI Navigators can handle dialect differences that may not be addressed sufficiently through the state’s translation vendor. All of the eight UI Navigators in the southern region of New Mexico are Spanish speakers who can assist workers with UI communications in both English and Spanish.²

Providing one-on-one assistance

UI Navigators can often provide more in-depth assistance to migrant and seasonal farmworkers than state UI staff in call centers, offering one-on-one assistance at the intensity and times needed by these workers. UI Navigators at UMOS describe meeting with participants sometimes for hours at a time, while UI Navigators in New Mexico make themselves available outside of regular work hours to follow up with participants. Navigators reported their flexibility to provide in-depth assistance allows them to build trust with participants.

² New Mexico intends to hire between 60 and 75 UI Navigators throughout the state, but only 8 Navigators

in the southern region had begun providing services at the time of our data collection.



“We’re advocating for people with a lot of barriers. It can be rewarding to see people who come in with many challenges and leave with a lot of issues solved.”

UI Navigator in Wisconsin

Outreach and education

Navigators promote awareness of UI benefits through outreach and educational activities, leveraging their community connections to guide their activities. In Wisconsin, UI Navigators at UMOS conduct outreach events to farms throughout the state based on their knowledge of agricultural employment cycles and anticipation of worker needs. Additionally, Navigators can draw from lived experience to help educate participants on UI and how to apply for benefits. Two Navigators in New Mexico have worked as seasonal farmworkers themselves, using their experience to guide their outreach activities at local farms and to inform their assistance to workers who earned wages in multiple states. For example, one Navigator who previously worked as a seasonal farmworker planned an outreach event at a local farm at the end of a crop cycle, knowing that at this time many workers may be laid off or leaving for new farms.

Practice Implications

The approaches Wisconsin and New Mexico have taken to serving migrant and seasonal farmworkers through the UI Navigator grant program might serve as useful examples for other states seeking to promote UI program access and benefit receipt among eligible migrant and seasonal farmworkers. These workers can face complex barriers to receiving UI for several reasons: language barriers, the nature of their work and travel between states, cultural differences, and their level of education. To best serve this population, respondents suggest it is important to

hire bilingual staff to provide language translation and interpretation assistance. Additionally, hiring staff with lived experience and connection to communities of migrant and seasonal farmworkers may advance better understanding of participant needs and stronger relationships with participants.

Citations

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Navigators Evidence-Building Portfolio: The UI Navigator study is part of the larger Navigators Evidence-Building Portfolio, a study funded by DOL to explore the potential of Navigators to improve outcomes and equity in workforce programs. Visit the [Navigator Evidence-Building Portfolio](#) website for additional information about the project and related publications.

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