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The New Farm Crisis

by Lisa Turner, LMFT, Counselor

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It might be surprising to some living and working outside of agriculture to learn that a new farm crisis is looming. Some experts would argue that this is the same farm crisis of the 1980s, continuing. This crisis is not just of a financial nature, but a mental health crisis as well.

Between 2013 and 2017, net farm income for US farmers declined 50 percent. In 2018, median farm household income is expected to increase .8 percent from its 2017 level. (Farm household income includes both farm and off-farm income.) What translates into affordable prices at the grocery store does not always translate into a livable wage for a farmer.

Michael Rossman, a farmer and psychologist in Harlan, Iowa, has become a leading voice in farmer behavioral health. He, along with other psychologists, has developed something called the “Agrarian Imperative Theory.” In short, that theory holds that most human beings have an innate urge to provide food, clothing, and shelter for their families. In the case of farm families, that imperative goes further, in that they also want to own and hold onto the land that produces these things, sometimes at any cost. Even though a farmer might not be making ends meet, they are unlikely to stop trying, until the trying gets very, very hard.

Historically, the cost of the agrarian imperative is a person’s mental health. The guilt of walking away from a farm that has been passed down through the generations, and that a farmer has been raised to love, is overpowering. When a farmer can’t fulfill this purpose, he or she often feels despair all the while pushing themselves and moving forward because it’s all they know. Adding to the strain on one’s mental health, farmers work long hours and with these long hours comes a lack of time for themselves and their families, poor self-care, limited hobbies, and social isolation.

Recent studies into the suicide rates among farmers are as alarming as they are conflicting. A study by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 2016 “suggested that male farmers in 17 states took their lives at a rate two times higher than the general population in 2012 and 1.5 times higher in 2015” (The Guardian, 2017). However, some speculate that these numbers are low, given that certain agricultural states like Iowa were not included in the data. At the same time, other studies site difficulty in gathering accurate data and place the suicide rate double that of the general population. No matter how you look at it, the numbers aren’t good.

The good news is that the agriculture industry is aware of this trend, and continues to work to bridge barriers to care. Rossman, the farmer and psychologist in Harlan, created Sowing the Seeds of Hope, which provides behavioral health services to uninsured, underinsured and other at-risk farm and ranch families and agricultural workers. Seven states (Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wisconsin) formed the regional program in 1999. Sowing the Seeds of Hope became a model for the delivery of behavioral healthcare to farmers and their families, and inspired the Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network. Although unfunded in the 2008 Farm Bill, it is on the verge of being resurrected in the new farm bill, which was authorized on January 3, 2019. Included in this authorization is grant funding to extension and nonprofit organizations “to initiate, expand, or sustain programs that provide professional agricultural behavioral health counseling and referral for other forms of assistance as

necessary through farm telephone helplines and websites; community education; support groups; outreach services and activities; and home delivery of assistance, in a case in which a farm resident is homebound.”

The Archdiocese of Dubuque represents the 30 counties of northeast Iowa, which is predominantly rural. So if you aren't a farmer or don't work in agriculture, you probably know someone who is or does. This issue is not just an agricultural issue or even a mental health issue – it's an Iowa issue and better yet, a humanitarian one.

In the resource section of the Catholic Charities website is a long list of resources used for this article, as well as resources that will put farmers directly in touch with providers of all types – financial counseling, legal assistance, and stress management. Please feel free to share this information, and this article, with someone you know who may be struggling.

For more information about resources available to farm families, please go to www.catholiccharitiesdubuque.org/catholic-charities-services/counseling-services. For more information about the services that Catholic Charities provides, or to talk to a counselor, call 800-772-2758.

Prayer for Farm Families in Crisis

O God, our costs are up and prices for our produce down. The loan is due and there's no money to buy this year's seed. We feel alone, embarrassed in our need, like failures in our efforts to farm.

The harder we work, the worse it seems to get. There's no laughter or joy anymore, just a constant struggle to believe, to hope and to keep trying. Strengthen us, God.

Keep us gentle and yet firm, generous yet open to receive. Let us see your face in those who want to help and don't know how. Grant us perseverance and openness to your will.

Hold our family close as we do our best to know and act according to your will in the days ahead. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Resources

Churches' Center for Land and People

Address: P.O. Box 203, Monticello, WI 53570-0203

Phone: 681.821.3104

Contact: Tom Nelson

Email: tnelson@ccmadison.org

Website: <http://www.cclpmidwest.org/>

Resource Description: Since its founding in the 1980s, the Center has remained true to its mission, staying attuned to rural realities. The organization offers hope to farm families in changing and challenging times through prayer and celebration, action and reflection, education and advocacy. The Center's Winter Farmers' Markets & Meals for Hope program brings farmers and consumers together, and the Center collaborates with the Harvest of Hope Fund, a nonprofit, faith-based group that offers financial help to distressed farmers through grants.

Farm Aid Hotline

800-FARM-AID (800-327-6243)

Monday – Friday, 9 – 5pm eastern time

Farm Bill Law Enterprise (FBLE)

<http://www.farbilllaw.org/2018/11/19/what-usda-is-doing-to-address-mental-health-farmer-suicide/>

Farm Crisis Center

<https://farmcrisis.nfu.org/>

Iowa Concern Hotline

Address: 10861 Douglas Ave., Suite B, Urbandale, IA 50322

Phone: 800.447.1985

Contact: John Baker

Email: iowaconcern@iastate.edu

Website: <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/iowaconcern/>

Resource Description: Iowa Concern Hotline is a program of the Iowa State University Extension service and provides access to an attorney for legal education, stress counselors, and Information and Referral services. The web site features an extensive Frequently Asked Questions database for legal, finance, crisis and disaster, and personal health issues. The web site also features a live chat service where one can connect with a stress counselor and talk one-on-one in a secure environment. All services are available 24/7 at no charge. The Iowa Concern Hotline is also connected to the IA Farmlink program for new and retiring farmers, and to the Beginning Farmer Center, Sowing the Seeds of Hope, and Agriwellness to strengthen their range of services.

National Farmers Union

<https://nfu.org/2018/11/27/cdc-study-clarifies-data-on-farm-stress/>

National Suicide Prevention Hotline

800-273-8255

Sowing the Seeds of Hope

<http://www.agriwellness.org/ssoh.htm>