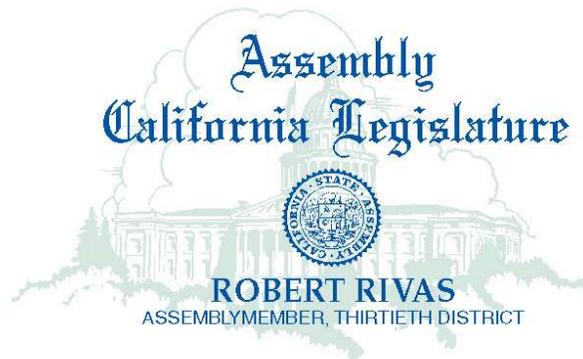


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May 4, 2020

The Honorable Phil Ting, Chair
Assembly Budget Committee
State Capitol, Room 6026
Sacramento, CA 95814

The Honorable Jim Cooper, Chair
Assembly Budget Subcommittee No. 4
State Capitol, Room 6025
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: Request of \$25 million to expand Project Roomkey to Agriculture Workers

Dear Assemblymembers Ting and Cooper:

I respectfully request one-time funding of \$25 million to expand Governor Newsom's housing initiative known as Project Roomkey,¹ to provide temporary accommodation to sick or at-risk agriculture employees² for the remaining duration of the COVID-19 health crisis. This expansion would allow many of our most vulnerable essential workers – agricultural workers who work and live in overcrowded conditions – to socially distance and, if required, quarantine themselves, thereby mitigating potential outbreaks of COVID-19 that might otherwise disrupt our food supply.

Maintaining social distancing is near-impossible for agricultural workers. At work, they often toil shoulder-to-shoulder without personal protective equipment or adequate sanitation facilities and commute to work on crowded buses.³ Similarly at home, they often live in dormitory-style or otherwise shared or communal conditions. A recent study in my District, for example, which includes the agricultural Salinas Valley and Pajaro Valley, found significant overcrowding in farmworker households, with an average household of 7 PPD (persons per dwelling) as compared to an overall 3.23 PPD in Monterey County and 2.60 in Santa Cruz County.⁴ Overcrowded housing conditions, in addition to often confined or similarly crowded working conditions, place these essential workers at greater risk for contracting COVID-19, especially since many lack reliable access to quality health care. In fact, there have already been COVID-19 outbreaks among agricultural workers in such places as South Dakota, Nebraska, and Pennsylvania.⁵ A similar outbreak here in California would threaten our State's supply chain at a critical time.

Project Roomkey is Governor Newsom's laudable initiative to secure motel rooms and other temporary accommodation to protect unsheltered individuals, another vulnerable and high-risk population in our State, from the spread of COVID-19.⁶ The Governor designated \$50 million to secure 15,000 motel rooms and also provide security, food, custodial services, and behavioral and health care. As of April 18th, the program had arranged 10,974 hotel and motel rooms and 1,133 trailers for extremely vulnerable

¹ See Press Release, At Newly Converted Motel, Governor Newsom Launches Project Roomkey: A First-in-the-Nation Initiative to Secure Hotel & Motel Rooms to Protect Homeless Individuals from COVID-19 (Apr. 3, 2020).

² "Agricultural employee" means a person employed in an agricultural occupation, as that term is defined in Section 859 of the California Labor Code.

³ See, e.g., The Atlantic, Essential Workers Are Being Treated as Expendable (Apr. 23, 2020).

⁴ See California Institute for Rural Studies, *Farmworker Housing Study and Action Plan for Salinas and Pajaro Valley* (June 2018).

⁵ See CNN, Trouble in farm country because of Covid-19 (Apr. 23, 2020).

⁶ The Governor has also launched a separate initiative to provide health care workers with hotel rooms. See Press Release, Governor Newsom Announces New Program to Provide Front-Line Health Care Workers with Hotel Rooms (Apr. 9, 2020).

individuals experiencing homelessness.⁷ The program has undoubtedly been effective in slowing the spread of the virus among this population, and thereby among the State as a whole.⁸

Project Roomkey's success can easily and quickly be expanded to other vulnerable populations in our State, including especially agricultural workers. In fact, in my District, Monterey County's Office of Emergency Services has already tried to secure 100 trailers for this purpose via the program – but has thus far been denied. Before the program can be expanded, more funding is needed.

It is for these reasons that I submit this budget request for a one-time allocation from the General Fund for \$25 million to fund an expansion of Project Roomkey, to be administered by the California Department of Social Services (DSS) in partnership with the California Office of Emergency Services (OES). These funds will be for the express purpose of securing temporary accommodation for agricultural workers who – per CDC, work, and/or local health guidelines – are required to self-isolate. Because most of these workers will only require this temporary housing for 2-weeks, after getting sick or a suspected incident of exposure, this money will go far to protect the up to million agricultural workers in our State. By my estimate, \$25 million will fund at least 3,000 rooms for an entire 3-month period to the benefit of as many as 40,500 agricultural workers,⁹ though DSS and OES should be granted discretion to secure trailers or alternative accommodation to motel rooms, in consideration of local costs, need, and housing availability.¹⁰

Farmworkers are putting their health and – indeed – lives on the line to help keep us fed during this pandemic. I am confident that by working together, however, we can take the additional steps necessary to keep them safe. Thank you in advance for your thoughtful consideration of this request. Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact Alejandra Garcia in my office at 916-319-2030 or Alejandra.Garcia@asm.ca.gov.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Rivas R', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Robert Rivas
Assemblymember, District 30

CC: Speaker Anthony Rendon
Assembly Budget Subcommittee 4

⁷ See Press Release, Governor Newsom Visits Project Roomkey Site in Santa Clara County to Highlight Progress on the State's Initiative to Protect Homeless Individuals from COVID-19 (Apr. 18, 2020).

⁸ "Even if the effort, known as Project Roomkey, is only moderately successful, it will be transformational," says Sarah Dusseault, chairwoman of the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority's oversight commission. See LA Times, L.A. races to save 15,000 homeless people from coronavirus — one hotel room at a time (Apr. 18, 2020).

⁹ This number assumes double-occupancy and that one room costs \$90 per night, which is the maximum state reimbursement rate for most California counties. See <http://hrmanual.calhr.ca.gov/Home/ManualItem/1/2203>.

¹⁰ Another benefit of expanding Project Roomkey is that its expenditures have thus far been approved for reimbursement at a rate of 75% by the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA). But, at least for prior disasters experienced in the State, FEMA has reportedly taken several years to complete its reimbursement process – so the State will still need to provide all upfront funding for the program.