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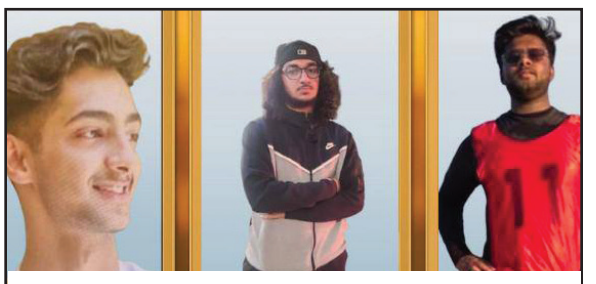

Crash victims were students | Page 7

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A mouldy window at a farm worker dwelling. SUPPLIED

Farm workers say they face hot, mouldy conditions, verbal abuse

Paige Seburn
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

The sun may set, but for many seasonal agricultural workers, the exhaustion doesn't.

After hours in scorching fields, they return to sweltering, overcrowded housing — rest is almost impossible.

"You leave work tired and you're going back to work tired," Junior, a Caribbean farm worker, said in an interview with The Lake Report.

Fearing retribution, Junior would not give his last name or identify the farm at which he works.

In a town like Niagara-on-the-Lake, where agriculture thrives, many farms rely

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George will get royal treatment

Project managers will strive to minimize construction impact

Jon Taylor, a NOTL resident and co-chair of Govan Brown, says the construction management company will do everything it can to minimize impact on residents and tourism, while striving to hire local and create economic impact from the Royal George rebuild. RICHARD HARLEY

Richard Harley | The Lake Report

Jon Taylor never quite figured out how to retire.

After helping build Govan Brown into one of Canada's top construction management firms, the Niagara-on-the-Lake resident stepped back — only to stay on as co-chair and dive headfirst into local causes, charities and now, one of the town's most high-profile redevelopment projects.

Taylor is helping lead the charge on the Royal George Theatre rebuild, a project that brings national experience to a hyperlocal challenge. His company, Govan Brown, has been awarded the construction management mandate for the three-year project, working alongside the Shaw Festival and Unity Architects.

For Taylor, it's personal — he lives just down the street.

"I would call it an increased interest in making sure that this thing goes well, not just from the Shaw's perspective, but from the community's perspective," he said in an interview.

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First draft of new official plan gets green light, resident input sought

Daniel Smeenk
Local Journalism Initiative
The Lake Report

It's been six years since the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake was sent back to the drawing board after submitting its newest official plan for review and being told it didn't match policy plans laid out by the Ontario government and Niagara Region.

Now, NOTL is in the home stretch of having a new plan that'll guide how the town will grow and how its land will be used — and, it hopes, one that the province will give a thumbs up to.

Niagara-on-the-Lake council approved the first draft of a new official plan, bringing the town closer to the final version it hopes to hand in to the province by November. It's now available for public review and feedback.

Coun. Erwin Wiens told The Lake Report that he's pleased with the progress.

"A lot of work needed to go into make it comply with provincial policy," he said.

"I'm very happy with it. I'm very happy that our timelines are still on track, that we can get this done."

In December, council told staff to prepare a new plan by October. The draft presented Tuesday is based on the 2019 version, with red-

Continued on Page 2

Curious about the **new proposal** for the **Old Hospital Site?**
Ask questions and share your thoughts **in person** on **August 12, 2025.**
Wellness Estates Information Session
Scan the QR Code or visit **wellnessestates.com/NOTL** to save your seat!
RSVP

Migrant workers say they face inhumane conditions

Continued from Front Page

on migrant workers each season.

Now, Canada's largest migrant-led coalition is sounding the alarm on new government changes to the nation's various temporary foreign worker programs that they fear could worsen their working conditions.

The Migrant Rights Network, a cross-Canada alliance of organizations of migrants, released a report at a virtual news conference Wednesday, outlining current conditions and why the federal government's proposed changes to the country's programs risk making circumstances like Junior's even worse.

Junior said verbal abuse and harsh living conditions are among the biggest challenges he faces — problems he's raised to the ministry of labour in Jamaica with requests to change farms, with no result.

"They keep on sending us the same form," said Junior.

"Everything that goes wrong with our boss, they always blame us and we always are the problem."

Junior has worked six years on the same farm and often sends money home to support his wife and young son.

"I'm trying to give him a better life than what I have," he said.

The coalition said most of the new proposed revisions reinforce employer control and low pay — a system that last year was compared to "modern slavery" by Tomoya Obokata, the UN's special rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery.

Employment and Social Development Canada is proposing an agriculture and fish program that would replace the four existing temporary foreign worker programs.

It includes six proposed changes, five of which the coalition raised concerns about: new stream-specific work permits, housing guidelines, pay deductions for housing, health-care provisions and transportation options.

The coalition began receiving discussion papers outlining each proposed change in May 2024, one by one. By March, it was told it had three months to review them.

It asked workers what they thought of the five troubling changes — and what changes they want for themselves.

"It's quite different from what the government is proposing," said Syed Hussan, executive director of the Migrant Workers Alliance for Change.

"They have rejected it unquestioningly."

The coalition gathered the perspectives of 514 migrant workers with an average of six years of experience in Canada's temporary programs.

Statistics came from surveys with 322 workers, while quotes and insights were gathered through focus groups with 192 participants across seven provinces, including international participants.

"It was a good survey," said Junior, adding he appreciated it for helping his voice reach the media, the public and the government.

"More people can hear and know about the conditions that we are living in," he said.

Hussan said it's the only source of worker input informing the policy — "the workers are very clear" on what they need, he said.

"We now have to see if the government will continue down this road and implement these proposals or not."

End tied permits and permanent residency sought

Junior said tied work permits — which bind workers to a single employer — give farmers too much control, making it hard for workers to leave, a challenge he's experienced firsthand.

Bosses "can verbally abuse us and belittle us anyhow they want to," he said.

Junior said he has been blamed for crop failures, even when returning the following season.

"They say if we leave and come back the other year and the peaches die, they say it's because we do not prune the peaches properly," he said.

Being able to switch employers would give him more power, he said.

"We could have more chances to go to a different boss. At least they would know that we have some power that we can leave when we want to," he said.

Status for all is needed, he said.

"We would have more say in all the conditions we're living in and who we work for."

Tied permits make it harder for a whopping 93 per cent of participants to protect themselves and assert their rights, said the coalition.

Some migrant farm workers endure extreme heat, overcrowded housing and grueling workdays. In agricultural hubs like Niagara-on-the-Lake, demand for labour is high — but so are the risks. These images, submitted to the paper, show conditions inside undisclosed farm worker residences. SUPPLIED/MIGRANT WORKERS ALLIANCE FOR CHANGE

Are you a seasonal worker facing abuse, unsafe working conditions or substandard housing? We want to hear your story. Several sources have told us they're afraid to speak publicly, fearing retaliation from their employers. But staying silent protects bad actors. Our goal is to expose abuse, hold employers accountable and help foster a culture of respect for the farm workers who power our local economy. In some cases, we may agree to protect a worker's identity. To share your experience, call us at 905-359-2270 or email editor@niagaranow.com.

The federal government said stream-specific permits would give migrant workers flexibility to change jobs in agriculture and fish processing, fill employers' peaks in labour demand and refill their vacant positions more easily.

But the coalition said this would enable exploitation and leave workers stuck and powerless, since the proposed permits won't help them escape bad jobs.

The coalition's report stated that for a worker to find a new place to work, they would need to find another employer with an unfilled temporary foreign workers employer authorization and labour market impact assessment.

This is "highly unlikely," the report said, for several reasons, including that those who raise concerns about their workplace are often blacklisted by being immediately sent home or aren't called back to the program the next year.

Those individuals are often considered "problem workers" and struggle to find work in the same sector, the report said.

Plus, it added, for the workers to change jobs in the same sector, they'll need approval from their employers and their country's representatives, which means the worker has to "out" themselves to the employer.

Tighten housing standards, stop docking pay

The federal government proposed new housing guidelines and used terms like "adequate" and "reasonable" — language Hussan called deliberately vague and deeply concerning.

"In law, there's a huge difference between the word standards and guidelines — standards are enforceable," he said. "For example, minimum wage is a standard."

Not only that, new guidelines could allow employers to deduct up to $1,074 monthly or $12,892 a year from workers for housing costs, 0.5 to 30 per cent of their gross monthly income, before taxes.

Under current rules, employers can deduct no more than $30 a week for housing.

Roughly two-thirds of workers reported poor or very bad housing, saying it should remain fully employer-paid and admitted they're afraid to speak out for fear of employer retaliation.

Junior said his housing regularly hits 35 to 36 degrees Celsius — hotter inside than out. Before waking up early for his busy, hot workdays, he often doesn't fall asleep until it cools down around midnight or 1 a.m.

And while Junior works outside in the heat, he said his boss stays in air-conditioning, yet refused to provide it for workers — just fans, which circulate the heat even more.

"He should be out here with us, experiencing this heat. But he's not," Junior said.

Community members donated an air-conditioning unit to Junior's farm on the weekend. "We should have (had) that AC sooner," he said, calling for more temperature control in worker housing.

Fair pay, stable hours and income protections needed

Junior — and 83.55 per cent of participants — said current wages aren't enough to support themselves or their families back home.

When it comes to anything beyond the basics, he said, "I like ice cream and I cannot buy it. I have to leave it alone."

Hussan said the federal government is "capitulating to employers who want to pay workers less."

"The rich want to get richer," he said. "This is supposed to be the government's response to complaints and criticisms that the system is enabling slavery."

"And they're not reforming it."

Current proposals fall short of true access to health care

While the proposed changes still require employers to provide private health insurance during uninsured periods, the coalition said workers have no real power to access it.

Workers want immediate, public health coverage that's independent of their employers — something 79 per cent of participants demanded.

Junior said he wasn't given time off when he sprained his ankle. Instead, he worked through the pain for a month, increasing his daily dose of painkillers.

"So the pain could ease after I would work," he said.

Health-care access is "very touch and go," he said, all depending on the circumstance.

Real access, the coalition said, requires coverage from day one, paid sick days, safe and independent access to services and support for workers and their dependents back home.

Steep travel costs still on workers

The federal government is proposing several models to manage transportation costs, to "facilitate workers to change jobs, thus providing additional opportunities for workers, while also providing added flexibility for employers within the sector," said a federal discussion paper.

However, the coalition said all options stop short of mandating full employer coverage of worker travel and ignore that migrant workers lack control over travel and have to pay for flights, other transportation, food and accommodations while in transit.

Simple outings require Junior to bike about 40 minutes round-trip, he said.

Participants said they're unfairly burdened with travel costs, sometimes paying thousands out of pocket just to reach their job sites.

Survey respondents reported a median cost of $880 per trip to Canada for travel and transportation, excluding airfare, which is paid by employers. Some reported much higher costs.

A copy of the coalition report can be found at migrantrights.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Controls-Not-Protection_-New-Federal-Proposals-Set-to-Worsen-Migrant-Worker-Crisis-MRN-Submission-June-2025-1.

This story is the first in a series. A follow-up will explore the coalition's recommendations and further insights from Hussan on what meaningful reform should look like.

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