



## FIRST FOCUS

CAMPAIGN FOR CHILDREN

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July 8, 2014

The Honorable John Kline  
2439 Rayburn  
House Office Building  
Washington, D. C. 20515

Dear Congressman Kline,

I'm writing on behalf of the First Focus Campaign for Children, a bipartisan advocacy organization dedicated to making children and families a priority in federal policy and budget decisions. As advocates of children, we strongly believe that all working youth, regardless of the sector they are working in, should be afforded equal protections to ensure their safety, health, and well-being. We are deeply concerned with the findings in a recent report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) that documents widespread hazards for children as young as 12 working on U.S. tobacco farms. These children are hired mostly by large tobacco farms to work in the fields for exceedingly long hours and in deplorable working conditions. We urge you to schedule a committee hearing immediately to examine the report findings and determine whether there are steps the federal government must take to better protect children.

Over 500,000 children and teenagers toil in agriculture, one of the most dangerous work industries in America. The 138-page HRW report documents conditions for children working on tobacco farms in the four states where 90 percent of U.S. tobacco is grown. These states are North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia. Three-quarters of children HRW interviewed, many whom are U.S. citizens, reported vomiting, nausea, headaches, and dizziness while working on tobacco farms, symptoms consistent with acute nicotine poisoning. Acute nicotine poisoning also known as "Green Tobacco Sickness" occurs when nicotine is absorbed through the skin from prolonged contact with tobacco plants. Public health research has found that non-smoking adult tobacco workers have similar levels of nicotine in their bodies as smokers in the general population.

Occupational exposure can be dangerous for adult workers but even more dangerous for children whose bodies are still developing and even more vulnerable to exposure. Studies highlighted by a 2014 report from the Surgeon General found that nicotine exposure during adolescence may have long-term adverse consequences for brain development. As you know, in the United States, children under age 18 cannot legally buy cigarettes or other tobacco products, yet children working in the tobacco industry are routinely at risk of acute nicotine poisoning from working directly with tobacco. Furthermore nicotine is a stimulant, causing anorexia and insomnia, both of which greatly exacerbate the risk of heat illness and injury.

Human Rights Watch found children as young as 7 working in U.S. tobacco fields, and children of ages 11 and 12 working 10- 12 hours per day or more. These children described working in extreme heat, using sharp tools and heavy machinery, and working at heights of more than one story in curing barns. More than half of the children

interviewed reported being exposed to toxic pesticides. Finally, most of the children interviewed by HRW said they had no access to toilets or a place to wash their hands at their worksites, leaving them with tobacco and pesticide residue on their hands during meal times. Public health experts have noted that several pesticides commonly used during tobacco farming are known neurotoxins that can cause cancer, depression, neurologic deficits, and reproductive health problems.

We must carefully examine HRW's findings, assess whether there are regulatory gaps, which leave children vulnerable, and determine whether those tasked with enforcement are adequately using the tools they have to protect children.

We are prepared to work with you in scheduling a hearing and other committee action on this critically important issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bruce Lesley". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Bruce Lesley  
President