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Nonprofit is helping farm laborer with medical, living assistance after stroke

By Ivette M. Yee
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Enrique Carrizales was working on the farm one hot June day when he suddenly became dizzy and fell. Little did he know he was having a stroke that would stop him from working or providing for himself or his family again.

It could happen to anyone.

Originally from Mexico, Carrizales, 50, of West Delray Beach, has been a farm worker and U.S. resident for more than 25 years. That day in June he was checking on the crops and piling bags of seed when a stroke hit. Because no one was near when it happened, he leaned on his bicycle and pushed for miles to help.

Now, months later, Carrizales cannot work. He has blood clots lodged near his brain that could kill him. Without a job, he is a couple of payments away from being homeless and for the first time depends on food stamps. With help from the Farmworker Coordinating Council of Palm Beach in Lake Worth, he is seeking medical and living assistance. The nonprofit organization is dedicated to improving the quality of life of migrant and seasonal farm workers through education, advocacy and access to services.

"If I was well I would be on my tractor, spreading fertilizer or tending crops," Carrizales said. "But now just the sound of a tractor hurts my head."

Before his stroke, Carrizales regularly sent money to his family in Rio Bravo, Mexico, where he has two grown sons. His wife, Ana Luisa, moved to the United States two years ago and is a homemaker. During the day, she helps care for Daniel, 2, the son of a family member who works but cannot afford child care.

"Enrique has never had a problem, he's never been sick," said Ana Luisa Carrizales, 43. "But from day to night everything has changed."

Enrique Carrizales' skin is tough and leathery. His hands are rough from tending fields filled with green peppers, tomatoes and cucumbers. His wife sees her once strong and active husband battling depression and pain. His hands, once strong and limber, shake often. He suffers frequent, severe headaches.

"He doesn't have the will to get up or eat. There are times when everything bothers him," Ana Luisa Carrizales said. "Sometimes it's like he just wants to die. And I wonder what are we going to do tomorrow?"

Enrique Carrizales said even though he worked for the same company for more than two decades, sometimes 60 to 65 hours a week, he never had health insurance. The

company is not helping him.

The couple has tried to get financial help from different organizations, but because Enrique Carrizales is accepting unemployment, he is declined. But without the unemployment money, the couple doesn't have enough money to survive.

It's been a constant fight, he said.

"I would never ask for help if I didn't need it," he said. "I've been in this country for 25 years and have never asked for anything. But now when I need it, they don't want to give it. I find myself hopeless."

The Farmworker Coordinating Council gave Carrizales rental assistance and access to medical care so he can get medicine and visit doctors. That meant working through red tape and paperwork.

"We help farm workers like Enrique because we see the struggles they go through," said Geraldine Diaz, a caseworker at the Farmworker Coordinating Council. "We see them working so hard, giving up their families for the farms. Many of them don't get compensated as they should, and whenever they get hurt the employers find it incredible that they could get hurt on the job.

"We want to be advocates for them, give them a voice and access to services that can help them," she said.

Now Enrique Carrizales waits. The medicine he takes makes him sleep a lot each day, but he sometimes manages to take walks to stay active. The straw cowboy hat that once shielded his face from the sun on the farm is now painted orange. If he falls again, someone would notice, he said.

"The best years of my life, when I was younger, I spent in the fields for my family," he said. "Some people come over here and forget their families. I could never do that."

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