

Nun Tells Panel on Hill of Helping Va. 'Migrant-Slaves' to

By Jeff Nesbit
States News Service

A Roman Catholic nun told Congress yesterday she has been running a makeshift "underground railroad" in Southwest Virginia for migrant farm workers since 1980 because federal officials have balked at investigating slavery complaints.

Sister Adele Della Valle told a House education and labor subcommittee that she has whisked dozens of "migrant slaves" to freedom in vans or cars during Southwest Virginia's fall apple season after terrified workers came to her for help.

Sister Valle said she helped at least 20 migrants escape from an unnamed Southwest Virginia camp during her first year as a volunteer for the Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers Association and that 60 others escaped from other camps that year as well.

"It is my conviction that the men who begged us to leave camp did so out of desperation to get away from [their crew leader's] inhumane control," she said. "If they were indebted to him, it was because of unfair working conditions and unjust pay.

"Even a person who is in debt has a right to freedom to come and go—freedom which [the crew leader] denied to his employes. This is tantamount to slavery," she said. Valle said the crew leader held the migrant workers hostage, claiming they owed money for room and board, as well as beer, marijuana and cigarettes.

Sister Valle said she has continued to help migrant workers leave camps since her first year as a volunteer because police and federal officials with the Department of Labor haven't acted on repeated complaints.

One migrant worker, Oliver White, who "escaped" from a Southwest Virginia camp Sept. 3 also testified that at least one crew leader at that camp is holding as many as 40 farmworkers in peonage—a form of slavery where a person is held against his will because of physical or violent threats.

White said he was forced to remain in a work crew for roughly two months because his crew leader said he owed him money for food, shelter, moonshine whiskey, beer, cigarettes and marijuana.

"It's slavery, you know, because it's sort of like being on a chain gang, in jail—people watching you all the time," White said. "The atmosphere was like if you did try to leave, something would happen to you."

The name of the crew leader described by White was withheld during the hearing. Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.), chairman of the subcommittee, and subcommittee aides who spent five months investigating camps in Virginia, Florida, and North and South Carolina have charged that federal officials responsible for following up complaints of slavery in migrant camps have not been doing their jobs.

"We're 100 percent sure of the allegations" about slavery, said a Miller spokesman. "But our primary purpose is to find out why Justice and Labor department officials haven't moved on this."

The Labor Department's assistant administrator in Atlanta, Richard Robinette, told the subcommittee that the department has recently reached an agreement with the FBI to immediately turn over complaints about migrant slavery to that agency for investigation.

"The new policy is anything that hints of peonage goes right to the FBI," Robinette testified.

Robinette denied allegations that area offices along the Eastern Seaboard had failed to properly investigate the crew leader described by White even after dozens of complaints had been filed against him by migrants over a five-year period.

Robinette, said the complaints were "nine or 10 months old" by the time the Labor Department first saw them.

"The allegations came in almost a year after the fact," said Robinette. "If they were all that serious, why didn't someone do something about it earlier?"

However, another Labor Department administrator from Philadelphia, John Craven, testified that his regional office "routinely" puts serious complaints—including charges of wage slavery—on the back burner for up to a year because of a tremendous backlog and personnel shortages.



Sister Adele Della Valle, with workers Daniel Mueller, left, and Oliver White, says complaints to