

For California Farmworkers, Telehealth Visits With Mexican Doctors Fill a Gap

Predominant health concerns among workers include obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes and mental health.

February 24, 2025 By Victoria Clayton and KFF Health News

This coastal valley made famous by the novelist John Steinbeck is sometimes known affectionately as “[America’s salad bowl](#),” though the planting and harvesting is done mostly by immigrants from Mexico.

For Taylor Farms, a major global purveyor of packaged salads and cut vegetables, that’s made it a logical place to pioneer a novel type of health care for its workforce, one that could have broad utility in the smartphone era: cross-border medical consultations through an app.

The company is among the first customers of a startup called MiSalud, which connects Spanish-speaking Taylor Farms employees to physicians and mental health therapists in Mexico. Providers aren’t licensed in the U.S. and can’t prescribe medications but instead serve as health coaches who can dispense advice and work with a U.S.-based doctor if needed.

Amy Taylor, who has led the company’s wellness initiative since 2014 and is the daughter-in-law of [company founder Bruce Taylor](#), said about 5,600 of Taylor Farms’ 6,400 employees who work where MiSalud is currently available have signed up for the app, and 2,300 have used the app at least once. The service is free for employees and up to three family members.

Amy Taylor said the company hopes the app, which is part of a broader wellness program, can help employees stay healthier while keeping health care and other labor costs in check. She plans a full evaluation once the program has been in place for two years.

The health of farmworkers is a major concern for the state’s agricultural economy. A [2022 study](#) led by researchers from the University of California-Merced evaluated the health of more than 1,200 farmworkers and found that 37% of men and 47% of women reported having at least one chronic condition, including common conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and anxiety.

Taylor said her company’s employees, ranging from fieldworkers and drivers to retail packaging and office staff, mirror the study’s findings. She said predominant health concerns among workers

include obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, and mental health.

“These are the people who are feeding America healthy food,” Taylor said of the company’s employees. “They should also be healthy.”

MiSalud — or “My Health” — was the inspiration of Bismarck Lepe, a serial entrepreneur and Stanford graduate, who hails from a migrant farmworker family. Until age 6, when his family settled in Oxnard, California, they would travel between Mexico, California, and Washington state to harvest fruit. He saw that family and friends often delayed health care until they could return to Mexico because the U.S. system was too difficult to navigate, and insurance coverage too expensive or hard to find.

“My mother still prefers to get her health care in Mexico,” Lepe said. “It’s easier for her.”

Lepe and co-founders Wendy Johansson and Cindy Blanco Ochoa launched MiSalud Health in 2021 with \$5 million from a venture capital fund backed by Melinda French Gates’ Pivotal Ventures, which focuses on social-impact investing. It has since added Samsung Next and Ulu Ventures as investors.

MiSalud started out by offering consultations with Mexican physicians for individuals who downloaded the app, Johansson said. But people keen enough to find the app, download it, and sign up for the program themselves weren’t ultimately those who needed it most, and in 2023 the company pivoted to offering its service to companies as an employee benefit. (Individuals can still use it too.)

Besides Taylor Farms, the company counts the California city of Lynwood among about a dozen other clients, according to Johansson. MiSalud touted that nearly 40% of employees served by its platform say that without the app they would either have ignored their health concerns or waited until they could travel to Mexico to see a doctor.

Paul Brown, a UC-Merced professor of health economics who contributed to the university’s farmworker health study, warned that telehealth consultations aren’t adequate substitutes for in-person care by a primary care physician or a specialist. However, “to the extent that these types of programs can kind of link people into more standard care, that’s good,” he added.

Brown said MiSalud’s approach could be more effective if policies changed to allow Mexican doctors to more easily treat patients in the U.S. A California program begun in 2002 allows Mexican doctors to travel to the Salinas Valley and other heavily Latino communities and treat patients, but cross-border telemedicine, even [between states](#), remains limited.

Even so, Taylor Farms employees say the app has been helpful. Rosa “Rosita” Flores, a line supervisor with the company’s retail operations, said she decided to give MiSalud a try after co-workers raved about it.

A recent company wellness fair, partly sponsored by MiSalud, had alerted her to the importance of

monitoring her blood sugar and blood pressure levels, so she booked an appointment on the app to discuss it. “The app is very easy to use,” she said in Spanish. When she had to cancel a video chat after her daughter got sick, the health coaches followed up by text.

Proponents of cross-border medicine say the approach helps bridge linguistic and cultural barriers in health care. Almost half of all U.S. immigrants — about two-thirds of whom are native Spanish speakers — have [limited proficiency in English](#), and research has repeatedly shown that language barriers often discourage people from seeking care.

For example, Alfredo Alvarez, a MiSalud health coach who is a licensed physician in Mexico, pointed to belief in el mal de ojo, or the “evil eye” — the idea that a jealous or envious glance by someone can cause harm, especially to children. An American doctor might be dismissive of the notion, but he understands.

“This isn’t uncommon here,” he said of Mexico. “It’s a belief in traditional medicine.”

It’s not that Alvarez encourages his socios, or members, to pass an egg over the child or make the child wear a special bracelet — traditional ways of diagnosing and treating el mal de ojo. Rather, he acknowledges their traditions and steers them to evidence-based medicine.

MiSalud’s coaches can try to break stereotypes as well. For example, Alvarez said, a Mexican reverence for machismo can translate to the idea that “men don’t do doctor visits.” Meanwhile, he said, women may overlook their health in prioritizing other family members’ needs.

Coaches also try to remove the stigma around seeking mental health treatment. “A lot of our socios have been extremely uncomfortable with or wary of mental health professionals,” said Rubén Benavides Crespo, a MiSalud mental health coach who is a licensed psychologist in Mexico.

The app tries to break through by making it easy to book counseling appointments and asking questions such as whether someone has trouble sleeping, rather than invoking more worrisome or potentially stigmatizing terms like anxiety or depression.

MiSalud representatives say the app saw a 50% increase in requests for mental health support following the November presidential election. A more common request, however, is grief counseling, often following the loss of a loved one.

“Loss requires adaptation,” Benavides said.

For Sam Chaidez, director of operations for a Taylor Farms location in Gonzales, MiSalud is a welcome addition for weight management. The son of fieldworkers, Chaidez graduated from UC-Davis and returned to the Salinas Valley to work for the company in 2007.

In 2019, Chaidez, a new parent at the time, began to understand his risk for diabetes and other health problems because of Taylor Farms’ wellness program. Through diet and exercise and, more recently, coaching by MiSalud, Chaidez has shed 150 pounds.

Chaidez encourages co-workers to walk with him at lunch, and he credits MiSalud coaches for helping him keep the weight off and stay healthy. “It’s been a great help,” he said.

This article was produced by [KFF Health News](#), which publishes [California Healthline](#), an editorially independent service of the [California Health Care Foundation](#).

[This story](#) was published by KFF Health News on February 4, 2025. It is republished with permission.

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