

Miami Herald

FARM LABORERS GETTING NEW HOUSING COMPLEX

TONY PUGH Herald Staff Writer

May 9, 1996

"Cip" Garza remembers the Everglades Labor Camp when hundreds of migrant families stayed in broken down trailers with leaky roofs, sagging floors and no electricity. The son of migrant parents, Garza worked the fields. So did his wife Maria, who lived in one of the camp's rickety trailers with her parents, three sisters and two brothers. "Trailer 25-4. That was the space number. It was right about here," Garza recalled, pointing to a spot now occupied by a brand new pastel-colored duplex. "It's hard to believe the change."

Only longtime South Dade residents who remember what was could appreciate Wednesday's ribbon-cutting for the first 240 new rental homes at Everglades Farmworker Villages. When complete, the \$40 million development will offer 520 two-, three- and four-bedroom apartments, making it the nation's largest housing complex for farm laborers. Each unit features a new gas range, refrigerator and tiled floors. The development will also feature three child-care centers, an educational enrichment center, sports fields and a community meeting hall.

It took the destructive force of Hurricane Andrew to spur improvements at the old labor camp. Hundreds of government trailers were provided to temporarily replace the older ones destroyed in the storm. The new trailers were a marked improvement, but migrant workers like Norma Leos are eager to move into Everglades Villages. "These are beautiful houses," Leos said. "I've never lived in anything like this. After Hurricane Andrew, there was nothing left, so this is like being in heaven."

Garza, 48, who left the fields and finished college, is now a special assistant to Henry Cisneros, secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. His wife Maria works in the public liaison office at the White House. He hopes their humble beginnings and current success will make other children of agricultural workers see that anything is possible. The new homes, he said, should help raise their self-esteem and provide them enough room to comfortably concentrate on their studies. Everglades Village was funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Housing Service. Undersecretary Jill Long Thompson was on hand Wednesday for the ribbon-cutting ceremonies.

Rent will be \$350 for two-bedroom units, \$370 for three-bedroom units and \$390 for four-bedroom apartments. On average, migrant workers make only \$6,000 to \$8,000 a year, compared with \$8,000 to \$12,000 for year-round laborers. Depending on their incomes, the tenants will pay only 30 percent of their monthly income for rent. A USDA rental subsidy program will pick up the rest. The development should be completed by 1998, said Steve Kirk, executive director of the Everglades Community Association, the agency overseeing the project.