



# LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS

MICHIGAN

---

EDUCATING AND ADVOCATING FOR RESPONSIBLE GOVERNMENT

October 7, 2015

Majed Ghussaini  
Program Manager, Migrant Labor Housing  
Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development  
P.O. Box 30017  
Lansing, MI 48909

Dear Mr. Ghussaini:

According to the Michigan Department of Agricultural and Rural Development website, agriculture is responsible for 22 percent of the state's employment and contributes over \$100 billion annually to the state's economy. Agriculture is an economic sector critical to a thriving Michigan economy. It is essential to attract a skilled, reliable agricultural workforce throughout the state, from the "Little Finger" to the agriculturally dense counties throughout mid and southern Michigan.

The League of Women Voters of Michigan is pleased that MDARD is working to ensure appropriate living conditions for Michigan's migrant and seasonal agriculture workers in its review and update of *P.A. 368 of 1978, Part 124, Agricultural Labor Camps*. As you may be aware, the League of Women Voters Leelanau County has worked diligently and cooperatively over five years with local, regional, and state resources, including regional migrant housing inspector Ms. Ginger Bardenhagen, to study the living and working conditions of Leelanau's migrant and seasonal agricultural workers. The LWVMI also adopted an Agricultural Migrant/Seasonal Worker position at its 2015 Convention. In summary the LWVMI supports:

State and local governments should pass legislation and publicly fund programs and services that address the ongoing challenges faced by agricultural employers to recruit and retain viable, skilled migrant/seasonal farm workers. It is quality of life issues for workers and their families that draw workers in a competitive labor market. Quality of life is enhanced by safe, healthy, affordable housing; education; health care; fair treatment by law enforcement and other services provided by state and local government offices and agencies.

The LWV Leelanau County is prepared to support MDARD's work to ensure safe and sound housing conditions. Ms. Suzanne Hoff, former vice president of the LWV Leelanau County and chair of the LWV Leelanau Farm Labor Study Committee, has shared some particular concerns regarding both quality and quantity of migrant and seasonal worker housing:

There have been reports of unlicensed seasonal agricultural worker housing rife with mold, toilet backups, and leaking roofs. Unlicensed housing may be provided by agricultural employers and

occupied by workers and their families who cannot afford high summer rental charges for local seasonal housing in a resort area. Mobile home housing has also been observed to be susceptible to deterioration and should be closely monitored.

Further, some issues, relative to state and federal housing guidelines, include:

- the need for increased support, including public funding, to build new or refurbish existing agricultural labor housing with matching grants of \$30,000 and above being optimal,
- the elimination of agricultural labor housing permit and licensing conflicts between state agencies such as the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (MDARD) and the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA). One example is laundry facility and equipment requirements. At least one washing machine per 10-15 people in seasonal housing would be optimal; and
- the expansion of licensing and requirement for inspections of agricultural labor housing with four or fewer migrant/seasonal workers.

We are certain that the State of Michigan, particularly the Department of Agricultural and Rural Development, shares our concern for the wellbeing of agricultural workers, as well as the ability to attract them to Michigan. Addressing the needs of both workers and employers helps to ensure a thriving agricultural market for Michigan's economy.

I encourage the MDARD to continue working with the dedicated advocates of the LWV Leelanau County as well as our state LWV to ensure that Michigan's guest workers are happy, healthy and a stable resource for Michigan farms.

Sincerely,

Judy Karandjeff  
President  
League of Women Voters of Michigan

Attachments:

- (1) "Report on Agricultural Migrant/Seasonal Workers in Leelanau County 2013-2015," by LWV of Leelanau County
- (2) LWVMI position on Agricultural Migrant/Seasonal Workers

cc: Jamie Clover Adams, Director MDARD