

Citizens tell panel conditions for migrant farmworkers in Michigan are bad

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KALAMAZOO -- Conditions for migrant farmworkers in Michigan are deteriorating, and if they don't improve, the workforce behind a \$2 billion industry could be driven out, area citizens told a state commission Monday.

The [Michigan Civil Rights Commission](#) met in Western Michigan University's Adrian Trimpe Distributive Education Center to hear testimony from the general public and members of [Farmworker Legal Services of Michigan](#), an agency based in Bangor that provides legal services to migrant workers.

"This group (migrant farmworkers in Michigan) is being systematically deprived of its rights," said Thomas Thornburg, the managing attorney for Farmworker Legal Services.

An underfunded program that inspects grower-provided housing for migrants is among the largest problems facing migrant workers in Michigan, said Stephanie Little, an attorney with Farmworker Legal Services.

Little said it is the state's responsibility to conduct annual health and safety inspections of the roughly 800 dwellings for migrant workers in Michigan. The inspections are done by the Michigan Migrant Labor Housing Inspection Program, under the [Environmental Stewardship Division of the Michigan Department of Agriculture](#).

But the division took a blow in May when Gov. Jennifer Granholm issued an executive order cutting \$345,000 from three programs. Cuts in the inspection program totaled \$150,000 and trimmed staff positions from seven to four and a half, said Jim Johnson, director of the division.

The division was able to save the program this year by moving money from other programs. But Johnson said that if other lines of revenue aren't found soon, the program could disappear.

Others at the meeting said this would be bad for the workers and bad for the state.

"We can't assume that farmworkers don't communicate with each other. They do," said Juan Marinez, who works for Michigan State University Extension. "If there's communication that Michigan isn't hospitable to farmworkers, they'll leave."

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