

Recent report cites Third World-like living conditions for migrant workers

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EAST LANSING - Before enrolling at Michigan State University, the only life 18-year-old Marivel Quiroz had known was the back-and-forth trek she and her family would take every year in search of farm work.

From Texas to Michigan and back, their lives revolved around the harvest seasons, going wherever there were crops to be picked and money to be earned.

It was like living in the shadows, said Quiroz, who is a freshman living on campus at MSU. Changing schools every few months. Packing into tiny, crowded shacks. Celebrating, she said, when the family was lucky enough to land a house with indoor plumbing.

The harsh conditions sound shocking, said Isabel Montemayor, who works with students like Quiroz in MSU's College Assistance Migrant Program for the children of farmworkers.

But she said the woman's experience wasn't all that different from many others.

"It's an invisible population," Montemayor said.

"In my opinion, it's a form of accepted slavery. Ninety percent of the people in our state are never exposed ... to what migrants go through."

Recent events may start to change that.

Farmworker advocates and agriculture professionals gathered in Lansing last week for an annual two-day conference about issues facing the more than 90,000 workers and their families who help harvest Michigan crops every year.

The event was designed to give workers, farmers and the people who serve both a chance to recap the last growing season and plan for the next one. But the conference this year was dominated by something that happened even before the growing season began - a March report by the Michigan Department of Civil Rights that offered a scathing rebuke of the living and working conditions facing some migrant workers.

Industry dark side

The report cited several examples of nearly Third World conditions, including crowded and substandard housing, overexposure to pesticides and little access to health care.

It also revealed, perhaps, a dark side to an industry that has been lauded for years as the only growth area in Michigan's economy.

Agriculture is a \$63 billion business, producing more than 200 products every year and is second only to California in its diversity of commodities.

But that reputation will be tarnished if migrant workers are not better protected, said Daniel Krichbaum, director of the Department of Civil Rights.

He told conference attendees Friday the report was a "wake-up call" for the state.

"When I read that report and then went to see the farms, it didn't look a lot differently from what you see on TV of the refugee camps around the world," Krichbaum said.

"It's a sad thing to say about the United States and Michigan."

Some progress

However, progress has been made, said Marcelina Trevino-Savala, director of the Office of Migrant Affairs in the Department of Human Services.

She said outreach programs have been expanded to ensure more farmworkers and their families know about services available to them, and the department is actively working to achieve the 15 recommendations made by the civil rights report.

Those recommendations included hiring more state employees who speak Spanish, ensuring swift action against violations and boosting funding for annual housing inspections.

After the report was released, the Department of Civil Rights convened a task force of state agency directors and others in the farming industry to figure out how to implement some of the recommendations.

The group has met monthly but members admit progress has been slow.

A series of training programs was completed over the summer, per one recommendation, said Harold Core, spokesman for the Department of Civil Rights.

The group also is creating an internship program with the students in MSU's migrant program to funnel more Spanish-speaking employees into state migrant offices.

"The process is not anywhere near complete and needs to continue through at least next year," said attorney Tom Thornburg, whose law firm, Farmworker Legal Services, is one of the leading organizations in the state representing migrant workers. He's also on the state task force.

"There is no single or simple solution," Thornburg said.

Plus, there's little state money available to boost staffing levels to what they once were, said Don Koivisto, director of the state Department of Agriculture.

His office used to have six to 10 full-time housing inspectors to visit the state's 800 licensed migrant camps to make sure they meet health and safety standards. Today, the department is down to three inspectors, none of whom speak Spanish.

"We're spread very, very thin," Koivisto told conference attendees. "We know what we're doing. Give us the people to do it and we'll do it the way it should be done."

Not all farms bad

Civil rights officials say they want to be clear that not all farmers treat their workers badly.

After the report was released, Michigan Farm Bureau issued a statement lambasting it for casting a "damaging black eye" on all farmers. Now, a Farm Bureau representative is on the state task force and the Office of Migrant Affairs is publicly applauding farmers who take proper care of their workers. Even critics say they've witnessed farms where workers have access to on-site day care, schools and health clinics.

"This situation is not unlike others," Core said. "There are good apples in the bunch, and there are bad apples. We have to find a way to effectively deal with the bad apples."

Several state agencies have some responsibility for dealing with migrant farmworkers, including the Department of Energy, Labor and Economic Growth, the Department of Agriculture and DHS.

An inter-agency committee coordinates the various activities and inspections administered by each agency. That committee was created in the wake of a previous report in the 1960s that documented similar and more widespread farmworker abuse.

If there is any bright side to the issue, it's that things are not as bad as they were back then, said Guillermo Martinez, a former farmworker who now works with migrants for the state.

He's retiring this year and was given a lifetime achievement award at the conference.

"I was 5 years old when I started picking asparagus," said Martinez, 60. "We lived in everything from a migrant cabin to a barn. One time we spent a couple of weeks in Army tents. Back then, there weren't any child labor laws. If you were old enough to work, you worked. I guess we're doing better now than we were back then."

Migrant workers in Michigan

- More than 90,000 people come to Michigan every year to harvest crops. That number includes family members - children, spouses, parents - who don't work in the fields but travel to keep the family together.
- An estimated 70 percent of them are in the United States on legal work visas or are U.S. citizens.
- Their average income: \$12,000 to \$16,000 for a family of five.
- Most live in one of 800 migrant camps around the state provided by the growers who hire them.

Investigation

The Civil Rights Commission began investigating migrant working conditions in 2009 after a public forum in Kalamazoo raised some red flags about possible health and safety violations.

The commission decided to investigate further through a series of town hall-style meetings around the state where workers, growers and migrant advocates could testify about everything from wages to clean water.

Commissioners also visited several of the state's 800 licensed migrant camps.

Among their more startling findings:

- At one camp, there were three showers available for 35 women and children to share.
- At another camp, there was a single toilet and shower for all workers and their families to share with no curtain or other form of privacy.
- Several instances of overflowing or broken toilets and no running water.