Thousands of migrant farmworkers in Michigan are living and working in "intolerable" and "unconscionable" conditions, according to a scathing report released Monday by the Michigan Civil Rights Commission.

The findings are based on last year's statewide investigation, which included testimony taken in West Michigan by Department of Civil Rights staffers who went to a soccer game near Grand Rapids to interview migrant families.

The report details the bad housing, discrimination and poor working conditions in the fields that many farmworkers face.

The commission came up with 15 recommendations and urged the civil rights agency to work with other departments to improve housing inspections, ensure that workers get a fair wage and get the word out about water and bathroom facilities.

Civil rights commissioner Mark Bernstein praised those farmworkers who came forward to participate in the agency's investigation.

"I'm grateful to the very brave migrant workers and families who participated," Bernstein said. "This is a report that is about human dignity."

The report was critical of the job several state agencies currently are doing to ensure the safety and well-being of farmworkers.

A primary concern is the failure of some agencies to investigate and report civil rights abuses targeting farmworkers in a timely manner.
Agencies cited in the report included: the Department of Energy, Labor & Economic Growth, Human Services, Department of Agriculture and Michigan State Police.

"The Commission hopes that nothing in our report is misconstrued as an attack on the efforts or compassion of those who are doing their best to ensure the rights of migrant farmworkers and their families are protected and respected," the report read.

"To be sure, the Commission does hope that our report sends a strong and clear message about the deplorable working and living conditions of migrant workers in Michigan. This must change. This report is a first and necessary step."

The accompanying list of 15 recommended actions outline what the agencies can do to improve their efforts. They include making sure farmworkers' civil rights complaints are reported and investigated in a timely manner, and that laws against violators are more strictly enforced.

To help agencies implement improvement strategies, the civil rights commission on Monday voted to assign a civil right's employee to work directly with those agencies and make monthly progress reports to the board.

An official from DELEG publicly voiced support for the recommendations during the commission's meeting. Other agency officials have also agreed to cooperate, civil rights officials said.

The civil rights department launched its investigation in June 2009. Department staff and commissioners visited numerous housing and worksites throughout Michigan, including several in Kent, Ottawa, Kalamazoo and Oceana counties.

"During our on-site visits, Commissioners personally witnessed appalling living conditions in labor camp after labor camp," according to the commission's report. "We heard testimony that should shock the conscience of all Michiganders."
"In addition to being unconscionable in its own right, such abuses also hurt Michigan in economic ways. Mistreatment of today's migrant workers makes it more difficult to recruit needed workers in the future."

-- The Associated Press contributed to this report.

FACT SHEET
The Michigan Civil Rights Commission released these recommendations to help agencies that work with farmworkers better meet their needs:

• Improve migrant labor housing inspections

• Swiftly enforce fines and penalties against non-compliant landlords

• Ensure migrant seasonal farmworkers are not paid less than the required minimum wage due to insufficient "piece rates" or other reasons

• Better coordination between agencies

• Develop specific goals with the assistance of the state's Interagency Migrant Services Committee

• Better training of state employees working on site with growers and/or farmworkers

• Improve efforts to educate employers and workers about legal rights of farmworkers, including the right to drinking water and access to bathrooms in the fields

• Work with state police to clarify and to inform both the public and law enforcement agencies about the laws and regulations affecting the enforcement of immigration laws by police officers
• Identify specific amendments to Michigan law that could be made to address concerns raised in the report

• Find funding to and conduct an Enumeration Study to update the 2006 information

• Work with Secretary of State to clarify laws and requirements

• Eliminate any illegal use of child labor in agriculture

• Increase the number of Spanish-speaking state employees who work with farmworkers

• Solicit recommendations from organizations with expertise on farmworker issues

• Designate an employee of the department to serve as the commission's liaison on protecting farmworkers and require that person report to the civil rights commission on a monthly basis.