

***League of Women Voters Grand Traverse Area Leelanau Unit
Committee Report on a Study of the Agricultural Migrant Worker Visa
February 1, 2012***

Process and Procedure of the Study

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My job is to answer three questions. Why did we do this study? How did we do the study? And what will we do with the study?

Why did we do this study? At the November 2010 Leelanau League meeting, Suzanne moderated an outstanding panel on "The Migrant Worker in Leelanau County." Three days later a small group from this League attended a leadership workshop sponsored by the MI State League Board. The afternoon exercise was to choose a study topic that affected our particular area, that could bring together many different organizations and that would publicize the work of the League of Women Voters. As a result of these two experiences and the interests of members, the Leelanau League agreed to study two topics: Migrant Visas and Energy Issues.

Suzanne agreed to chair the Visa Committee. If you ever want to succeed at something like this, put a librarian in charge. Then add three lawyers; a professional pilot who was raised on a local farm; an elementary school principal; a businesswoman who owns a small local farm and a 45-year member of the League.

The committee's first important task was to look at the National League of Women Voters position on Immigration to see if our study would conflict or even be necessary. Passed in April 2008, the national position supports, among other things, improved technology both to facilitate employer verification of employee status and to allow shared information among federal agencies. It calls for verification documents with secure identifiers and more effective tracking of foreign workers. The position proposes programs that would allow foreign workers to enter and leave the United States to meet seasonal or sporadic labor needs. The national League position addresses immigrant worker visas, but we decided that focusing solely on the needs of our area – visas for agricultural migrant workers – was a valid and worthwhile undertaking.

How did we do the study? Our committee has met at least once a month since February, has exchanged hundreds of emails, and has spent countless hours doing research on the web and conducting and compiling interviews.

As required by the League of Women Voters, the committee's first task was to define the parameters of the study and to come up with a workable scope. Since we are

part of the Grand Traverse Area League, its Board had to give its approval first, followed by the members. The scope, “to study the past, current and proposed employment methods and work visa programs used by agricultural employers in our area” was approved last spring.

Now the work of gathering information began. As a group we created a list of people to interview – farmers, vintners, processors, laborers and employment agency workers in our area. We had hoped to interview current laborers but, as it turned out, harvest schedules, language barriers and our own perceptions that people might not be willing to talk to us, total strangers, prevented this. We wrote a questionnaire that would identify past and present employment methods used by local agricultural employers to obtain migrant labor.

We did a practice interview with a local grower to see if our questions were relevant. After much tweaking, the questionnaire was ready.

Promised complete confidentiality, letters were sent to everyone on our list. Recipients were asked for their help and were told they would be notified by a committee member to set up an interview. In late June, we began our calls, but it soon became apparent that much as the growers, vintners and processors wanted to talk with us, they had a higher priority – the crops. Most interviews were postponed until the fall.

During the summer, fall and winter, committee members kept busy by studying the history and economic impact of agriculture in this area; researching current federal and state visa programs; following recent immigration legislation affecting agricultural migrant workers; and locating proposals put forth by non-governmental organizations. In October interviews resumed. Usually, two of us were present – one to ask questions and the other to record answers. In a few cases, interviews were conducted over the phone.

Now that we have all this information, what will we do with the study? The League of Women Voters has its own set of time-tested procedures and practices. Next week, this committee will meet to formulate a set of questions based on our research. All 144 members of the Grand Traverse Area League will receive these questions, and, at member meetings, will discuss answers to them. From these discussions, we will reach a consensus that will be formulated into a position for the Grand Traverse Area League.

After the Board votes to accept the position, the members will reaffirm it at the annual meeting in May. If accepted, our position on Agricultural Migrant Worker

Visas will be the basis for actively educating the public and local elected officials on the challenges of providing adequate agricultural migrant labor in this part of Michigan.