

**Organizing immigrant day laborers on the street:
Where program design meets city policies and
neighborhood politics**

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Background

Presentation grows out of six years of ethnographic research with one group of day laborers in the SF Bay Area during master's and doctoral research

Current employment is with a Bay Area non-profit, the Multicultural Institute, operating two day laborer programs (Berkeley & Redwood City) together used here as a case study

Main Points

Current approach to day laborer well being and organizing is to establish day laborer centers

Often overlooked alternative is street-based programs—more inclusive but with other challenges

Street sites won't go away: workers' conditions (on-the-street & on-the-job) need to be addressed

Street-based programs demand different policies from local governments; & they oblige communities to accommodate immigrant workers in their midst

Overview of Presentation

- Policy trends towards day laborers
- Components of day laborer programs
- Challenges for changing street environment for street-based, open air hiring sites
- Case study used to illustrate:
 - 1) brokering cooperation from local authorities
 - 2) addressing community concerns,
 - 3) changing street dynamic and environment
 - 4) supporting day laborer needs.

Day Laborers

In California, recent immigrants from Mexico & Central America
Construction, painting & landscaping;
dirty and dangerous jobs
Utilize day labor as both entry level
and permanent source of work
Can obtain higher average wages per
hour than other jobs but with
irregular job opportunities
Ranges of ways workers 'relate to' a
hiring site. In Berkeley, 500+
registered each year (1100 in 3
years) but only 80 per day



PHOTO/MEGAN MCCALL,
Daily Californian 2001

Policy moments towards day laborers

- Punitive—INS raids (1980s in California) alongside anti-immigrant legislation more generally (prop 187 in California)
- Legislative—anti loitering ordinances challenged in court
- Carrot and stick approaches—ordinances against employers picking up workers coupled with establishment of hiring halls
- New approaches/cooperation, for example working partnerships between police and day laborers/ advocates
- Now: federal policy ICE raids, targeting workers/ workplaces, and targeting employers. A counter movement to establish sanctuary cities and non-cooperation clauses

Common to many day laborer programs

- Prioritize generating jobs and job contacts at fair wages (and 100% of wages go to workers)
- Range of political activism & advocacy and whether provision of services is a 'hook' or a central goal
- Provision of services (health, education, legal)
- Range of worker participation
- Community building (soccer, music, events)
- Worker training
- Typical goal is to encourage day laborers to leave street for presumably more favorable conditions inside

Potential pitfalls of day labor center model

- Many centers/hiring halls dependent on city/county funding—must cooperate with ordinances or, at the least, make efforts to get workers off the street
- Funded as a political measure (to ‘deal’ with the day laborers) but under the funding stream of employment services/social services
- Therefore often set up to fail—programs can never fulfill job demand and therefore there is limited incentive for workers to leave the street
- Also can pit some groups of workers against others (‘those who cooperate’ vs. those who don’t)



Photo: Erik Oeverndiek/San Mateo Daily Journal

Ways potential pitfalls have been addressed

- Allowing day laborers to self-select—those who prefer center & those who prefer street
- Center functions as community center with services for both center members and others
- Fighting to maintain right for workers to solicit work on the street with or without a center present
- Establish program at an existing hiring site; street-based or parking lot (i.e. Home Depot)

Case Study: Multicultural Institute programs

- Goal not to remove workers from street; all workers considered part of program; Job matching services are to *complement* and not *replace* bilateral contacts
- Show ordinances both ineffective/unnecessary (but enforcement of many existing laws helpful)
- Addressing “public nuisance” issues through modifying environment and outreach strategy
- Standing committees with local authorities & police; police as allies to program & to workers
- Creating good will with surrounding community: promote acceptance & appreciation immigrants
- Facilitating access to existing community resources

**Problem: Public
nuisance complaints**

**Problem: Community
anxiety about immigrants**

Blocking sidewalks
Rushing cars
Urinating/trash
Alcohol/drug use
Comments to women

**Solution is physical
change to
environment and
working with &
educating day
laborers**

Symbolism of unassimilated
Latino men in public space
NIMBY attitudes
Fueled by broader anti-
immigration sentiments

**Solution is education of
society/the community**
**BOTH TYPES OF EFFORTS
LEAD TO BETTER
POLICY & HEALTH
ENVIRONMENTS**

Program as vehicle for public health I

- Feel safe at site; not focus of police harassment, symbolism in non-cooperation policies with federal government, diminished drugs and alcohol
- Not asked to 'come inside;' autonomy not passivity; program jobs a supplement (“virtual hiring hall”), non-program jobs regulated
- Social services, training outreach brought to the street

Photo: Multicultural Institute



Program as vehicle for public health II

- “Hay quien por uno”—Staff provides emergency access and advocacy (cell phone), a listening ear, & accompany workers when given referrals
- Meals and sports weekly, reinforcing cooperation not competition, build on natural networks (hometown, kinship) and break down us vs. them

Photos: Multicultural Institute



Main points revisited:

Day laborers—are a visible tip of the immigrant iceberg.

With current economy street-based work will not go away;

Ordering street sites counters immigrant workers and their labor being invisible

Most day labor center components can be brought to the street—services, organizing, advocacy, training.

By definition, such programs reach a larger proportion of an unorganized group of workers and build common ground for protecting their rights and not undercutting each other

Cities can be brought on board by addressing ‘public nuisance’ issues & with good community outreach

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