

FOR DAY LABORERS, DECENT PAY BUT BIG RISKS

In County Survey, Most Cite Abuses by Employers

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Fairfax County's first comprehensive survey of day laborers has found that many earn more than the federal minimum wage but experience significant on-the-job abuses by employers.

A report accompanying the survey highlighted the risks and benefits of seeking temporary jobs at four sites in Annandale, Culmore, Herndon and Springfield that have become major ad-hoc employment centers for immigrants.

About 200 day laborers were interviewed a year ago for the survey.

Nearly all of them said they made above the federal minimum wage of \$5.15 an hour, and close to one in three said they earned more than \$10 an hour for doing temporary work, mainly for construction, landscaping and janitorial companies.

At the same time, 84 percent said they have had problems with their employers. The most frequent issue cited was a lack of breaks. Others complained they were paid less than what was agreed upon, and some said they were not paid at all.

Other problems included robbery, police harassment and in some cases violence.

"I went to law school in Peru, I speak English well, but I cannot make a living here," one day laborer was quoted anonymously as saying in the report. "You dream all your life of coming to the U.S., you get here, and you realized that it does not matter where you are when you are poor. Poor people are treated bad anyway."

Another said, "Every day it gets more difficult. . . . Rent does not forgive you. It doesn't matter whether you are or not documented nowadays. They kick you out just the same. There is not much work. The employers know that and take advantage. We are not even covered by the company's insurance when we have work accidents and get injured."

Supervisor Penelope A. Gross (D-Mason), whose district includes the Culmore site, said the survey would provide valuable demographic data on day laborers that would help policymakers make decisions.

"It's the first official [survey] that goes into this kind of depth," she said.

Judging from the day laborers' comments, she said, it is obvious that "we need to get safe places for day laborers to get jobs at the existing sites."

Nearly all of the respondents were Hispanic immigrants, with the largest group from Honduras, followed by El Salvador. Many said they were unable to find a permanent job because they lacked immigration documents and could not speak English.

Gross noted, however, that not having immigration papers does not necessarily mean that the day laborers are illegal immigrants. Many from El Salvador struggle to get their papers even though they are in the United States legally under a special asylum grant known as temporary protected status.

Questions about immigration status were not asked because surveyors believed they would intimidate the day laborers, said David Ellis, the county's neighborhood and community building coordinator, who was an author of the report.

"We wanted folks to speak to us," he said. "If the day laborers told us that, we would take that information; we just didn't feel we could go out and ask for that information."

The study did not make a specific policy recommendation, Ellis said, because additional research on day laborers needs to be done. Gross added that the biggest challenge the county faces is trying to fit the current sites into the community.

The day laborer site in Herndon, for instance, has prompted heated debates among officials over whether it should be shut down or moved. Some residents view the site, at a 7-Eleven on the corner of Elden Street and Alabama Drive, as an eyesore.

"We are trying to find something that works that accommodates what we need to do, which is to have a safe place for day laborers to come and be picked up for contractors," Gross said. "But trying to find where to put it at an adequate location that is in a commercial district is a challenge."

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A Portrait of Day Laborers Drawn From County Survey

Fairfax County officials recently finished a report on their first comprehensive survey of day laborers, or jornaleros, in an attempt to assist policymakers. Here is a snapshot of laborers from the survey, which took place a year ago at sites in Herndon, Culmore, Annandale and Springfield:

- Age: The average is 32. Most day laborers are 18 to 35.
- Country of Origin: Eight in 10 laborers are from Central America (37 percent from Honduras, 26 percent from El Salvador, 17 percent from Guatemala and 2 percent from Nicaragua). About 4 percent are from Mexico, and the rest are from South America.
- Living Arrangement: Nine in 10 laborers rent a room with family or friends.
- Employment: A majority of laborers seek work five to seven days a week; most work five to eight hours a day. Most have been coming to the sites for less than a year. Most walk there.

Top Five Jobs

1. Construction.

2. Landscaping.

3. Painting.

4. Cleaning/janitorial.

5. Carpentry.

Typical Hourly Salary

1 percent earn less than \$5.

5 percent earn between \$5 and \$6.99 an hour.

65 percent earn between \$7 and \$9.99 an hour.

28 percent earn between \$10 and \$14.99 an hour.

1 percent earn more than \$15 an hour.

Top Barriers to Employment

1. Lack of English proficiency.

2. Lack of documents.

3. Lack of transportation.

4. No permanent work available.

5. Low pay.

Top Issues with Employers

1. No breaks.

2. Paid less money than agreed upon.

3. Not paid for work completed.

4. Racial discrimination.

5. Bounced paychecks.

Source: Fairfax County Department of Systems Management for Human Services