

Centreville Day Laborers: Their Side of the Story  
Workers seek fair pay, safe conditions.

[By Bonnie Hobbs, Centre View](#)

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Good, steady jobs with employers who won't cheat them, health insurance and safe working conditions — these are the top things Centreville day laborers say they need.

Seven of them met last week at Centreville United Methodist Church with members of Wellspring United Church of Christ, some local residents, CUMC's Director of Missions Barb Shaiko, attorney Edgar Aranda who works on behalf of immigrants, and Martin Rios, assistant director of Project Hope and Harmony with Reston Interfaith.

The men — most of whom are in their 20s and originally from Honduras — spoke Spanish, interpreted by both Rios and Aranda. To protect their identities — and so they felt free to speak their minds — Centre View is only using their first names. Most of them used to live in the affordable, Knolls of Newgate apartments, but moved to the London Towne community because Knolls was leveled to make way for luxury condominiums.

Wellspring had already held five, community meetings about immigration in Centreville so, explained member Alice Foltz, "We thought that, if we were going to talk about them, we should talk with them. These are human beings living among us and we need to care about their health and safety while they're here."

Wellspring's Mike Morse said the group learned recently that, often, immigrants are forced to pay "exorbitant rent for crowded spaces that are unhealthy and unsafe," and wondered if that was the case with any of the laborers.

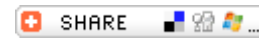
"The prices are high and there are not many comforts of life," replied Giovane, 29. "We pay \$1,600-\$2,000 a month, including utilities — water and electricity or gas." He said there are usually five to seven people per home.

"Does anyone here have a car?" asked Shaiko. Giovane said most of them have bikes, but Miguel and Teodoro, both 25, and Chinto, 27, don't, so they walk.



Photo by Bonnie Hobbs/Centre View

From left are Edgar Aranda and Martin Rios.



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"What are the things you need the most?" asked George Crossman of Wellspring. "Especially me, health care," said Giovane. "In the winter, I get colds because of the climate here." Denis, 17, said good jobs are needed, most of all. He and the others will do all sorts of work — construction, painting, flooring, landscaping, moving, etc. But with the downturn in the housing industry, said Denis, "Sometimes, I only work one day a week."

THE LABORERS generally average \$10/hour pay. The problem, said Aranda, is that "One day, they'll work 15 hours and, the next day, only two hours." Said Giovane: "There's not as much demand." Added Teodoro: "This year, it's much more difficult to find work."

Foltz asked if they make enough money to pay their bills, and Teodoro answered, "We're making less money." Furthermore, said Rios, "Most of the time, employers pay them with cash and fake checks or don't pay them."

"Sometimes, employers don't offer payment by the hour, but for the whole day," said Teodoro. "And sometimes, when we work more hours, we only get \$60 or \$80 — but we take it because we need it to pay our rent."

Chinto said their inability to communicate their feelings to their employer is also a huge problem. "Because we don't have access to a person who can speak English on our behalf to our boss, he can take advantage of us," said Chinto. "We leave for work at 6, 7 or 8 in the morning and come home at 10 at night — for \$60 or \$70 — and it isn't enough to buy a car."

But the situation continues to persist. Explained Rios: "[Chinto] feels he can't negotiate with his employer because the boss knows he's not going to complain — because he can't."

Giovane said he and the others know a "bad employer" who lied to their friends [about wages] so "everybody refused him" when this boss later tried to hire them. Nonetheless, he said, sometimes they have to work for him so they can eat and keep a roof over their heads.

"It's exploitation and blatantly unfair when they work long hours for such little pay," said Morse. "It really bothers me."

"As soon as we opened the day labor site in Herndon, that sort of behavior stopped," said Rios. "Employers had to guarantee at least \$10/hour and four hours of work a day — and lunch if they'd work more than five hours. But when Herndon closed the site, the guys had to go back to the streets, and now there are the same problems." And with the ongoing slowdown in the real-estate and construction industries, continued Rios, "Employers have small jobs and want to keep all the profits for themselves."

**MAKING MATTERS WORSE,** Centreville's day laborers must now compete for work with immigrants from another county. Once Prince William County began cracking down on illegal immigrants, said Denis, "A lot more people from Manassas came here to look for jobs."

Most of them vie for work in construction but, said Herman, 20, "We also deal with terrible situations in restaurant jobs. We get low salaries and work in unhealthy conditions without any protection or insurance. One guy cut his finger and the boss said, 'Just go home,' and he let us keep on working."

Denis and Giovane told of someone who'd paid them with a bad check. They tried to cash it three times, but there wasn't any money in the account and the bank kept the check. So, said Rios, more organizations like Aranda's need to be empowered to "stand behind these workers and also identify the bad employers."

"We have lawyers and we've settled many cases in Northern Virginia," said Aranda. "But we need support from our organization and from the community to hire more lawyers." There are also other problems. Rios said Teodoro is owed \$2,600 [in wages] and has been trying to recover it for a year. And Aranda's office has taken his case, but obstacles that wouldn't be a problem for the average person have prevented it from going forward.

"Teodoro needs to call us [at 703-772-1552] to set up an appointment, but his phone has been disconnected," said Aranda. "And he needs to come to our office to fill out some papers, but he doesn't have a ride to our office or money for a cab. And he'd lose a day of work if he came to see us." Cabell's Mill resident Stephen Vandivere then offered to drive him there.

Rios noted that he'd often written letters to "bad employers" on behalf of wronged workers, with a copy to Reston Interfaith. Said Rios: "When the employer saw the letter was in English, and a

copy was going to someone else, the employer would pay the worker what he owed him."

Herman said they could use that kind of support, and the other day laborers present concurred. Then Aranda and Rios said their individual organizations should work together to extend their operations into Fairfax County.

Transportation is also an obstacle. Vandivere asked what condition the men's bikes were in and if they needed repairs. "I'm involved with two bicycle organizations — one of which ships them overseas," he said. "I'm thinking maybe they ought to stay here."

Rios said anything Vandivere could do to help would be greatly appreciated. "They don't care about a bike's being fancy," said Rios. "They just need it to get them to and from work."

Vandivere asked if their bikes ever get stolen, and Teodoro said it happened to friends of theirs but "none of them make reports to the police." Giovane said most of them don't have any proof that a bike is theirs and, if it's stolen, they're "afraid the police will come and ask a lot of questions — especially about their immigrant status — that's the main concern."

Foltz asked what experience the men have had with the police in this community, and Giovane said they try to avoid the police. Vandivere said police here told him they don't ask about a person's status unless that person's committed a crime.

However, said Rios, "We also need to tell people how to avoid problems. I'm an immigrant, and everything — health care, laws, language, etc. — was different for me here. And nobody told me; I had to learn. If someone would give us this information, then we could avoid getting into trouble."

For example, he said, "In my country, Peru, if you have a pain and go to the hospital emergency room, you'd pay 50 cents. Here, you'd pay \$18,000. And if you don't pay your bill, you'll be in trouble."

Currently, said Rios, immigrants don't know the rights or obligations that go with living in the U.S., so "we need a small group that really wants to make a difference to teach immigrants how to be involved in the community."

"Maybe it's a dream," he said. "But if we opened one church, one day a week — just to teach these things — it would help. You

cannot just punish people; you need to educate them."



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