

Grappling Day-Labor Issue
Discussion spotlights illegal vs. undocumented.



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At the recent meeting about immigration issues in Centreville,

Del. Tim Hugo (R-40) referred to the fact that the Centreville Regional Library has become a de-facto gathering place for immigrants seeking work, since the Knolls of Newgate apartments across the street were torn down.

"People are saying they can't use the library," said Hugo. "They don't feel comfortable going there with 30-40 people hanging around outside."

One woman in the audience said illegal immigrants "broke the law by coming here." But Mukin Hussein of Project Hope and Harmony said what they've broken are "procedural laws, not criminal laws." And regardless of individual beliefs, the problem of what to do about all these newcomers still remains.

Hugo said there are about 20 million illegal immigrants in the U.S. and that, according to a Harvard study, their presence "hurts the wage structure of African-Americans and low-income wage earners." Said Hugo: "We need these workers, both in high-tech and in agriculture, but we also need people to follow the law."

Alice Foltz of Wellspring United Church of Christ said immigrants come here for better opportunities. "I don't blame some of these illegal immigrants," replied Hugo. "But immigration needs to be legalized."

Foltz is a teacher in Loudoun County and she spoke of the effect of a recent ICE raid on a business that resulted in the arrest of several, illegal immigrants. "A girl in my class, and her mom, are citizens," said Foltz. "But now she has no father and the family has no breadwinner. So [this crackdown] has on-the-ground effects on families, and now we'll have to help them with services. So the punitive actions often have results we don't expect."

Wellspring's Mike Morse said the basic question is "whether we're going to try to punish people or try to find solutions at federal, state or local level that are for everyone. I don't think a punitive attitude is the

answer. And we need day-labor centers; a place needs to be found that's appropriate."

Franklin Glen's Hilary Reilly asked what would happen to the day laborers who gather at the library, once the new state laws take effect July 1, and Hugo told her they'd have to move.

"I GET CAUGHT between having compassion for people in need and representing constituencies who don't want taxpayer money going toward funding a day-labor center," said Del. Chuck Caputo (D-67). "In this environment, with tight budgets, you're not going to see [that]."

But, said Hussein, "The Herndon Day Labor Center wasn't closed down because of funding, but because a town election was coming up." He also said what Prince William is doing is "creating an atmosphere of fear."

That's why this, particular group in Fairfax County is so important, said Caputo. "Groups like this who get together and discuss these things come up with solutions," he said. "Private groups and churches will have to continue this help." Agreeing, Hugo said, "We're trying to prioritize things, and there are decisions that have to be made on other things, like transportation and mental health, too."

Wellspring's Laurel Patton said education is also important: "We're all connected. Everyone we help become educated helps us all. If we don't enrich [immigrants], we lose that resource."

Edgar Aranda, an advocator with the Legal Aid Justice Center in Falls Church, said he's saddened whenever someone says "illegal" to describe a person. "If I lost my papers or green card — an administrative issue — would I suddenly become 'illegal'?" he asked. "So I'd prefer [calling them] 'undocumented' people."

As for the Harvard study, he said it's "divisive" to say illegals pull down black people's salaries. "What happened in Prince William is synonymous with racism," said Aranda. "And now Prince William is getting a bad reputation, so businesses are moving from there and going elsewhere."

However, asked Hugo, "When there were 3 million people up for amnesty in 1986 and 20 million in 2007, where will it end? People need to have a welcoming tone and not embrace racism; but illegal is illegal. Chuck and I are hearing about immigration from a lot of residents who don't [normally] get involved in politics, and I can't just reject the sentiment we're hearing from [them]."

Nonetheless, asked Foltz, "What do we do about these human beings living in our community now? It's difficult for them to leave and, although the economy here is struggling economically, their home [countries] are worse off."

Caputo asked the attendees what sense of responsibility they felt toward these people, and Wellspring's George Crossman replied, "We take care of the human needs of all people — documented or not — who live in our community and organize to get federal legislation to help us deal with the problem legally. Until that happens, we're all stumbling around in the dark with half solutions; and it should be uniform for everyone. We built this country on open borders."

BUT WHEN he goes door-to-door campaigning, said Hugo, "The people at the door screens are saying, 'Hey, there's something wrong.'" Furthermore, said Caputo, "My ancestors came through Ellis Island around 1903-04, and there were quotas for particular ethnic groups — those were the first restrictions."

Patton said she sometimes feels frightened when she sees a group of day-laborers outside the library. "But realistically, I have nothing to fear from them," she said. "They don't want to come after me; they want a job. So it's an unfamiliar situation, but what are we afraid of? If we understood each other better, it would help."

Still, said Hugo, "The Centreville library has no business being a day-labor center." Foltz said it seemed to her that "it would be better for the community if we had a day-labor center where they could gather to look for work. But with the current political and economic situation, it's probably not going to happen anytime soon."



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