

Forum Advises Day Laborers
Information, advice shared with Hispanic workers.

[By Bonnie Hobbs, Centre View](#)
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The first time members of the Centreville Immigration Forum invited local day laborers to a meeting, about eight showed up. But when they met again, Dec. 1, at the Centreville Regional Library, 90 Hispanic workers packed the room.

Most of the meeting was conducted in Spanish, with Edgar Aranda both moderating and translating. He's an advocator with the Legal Aid Justice Center in Falls Church and is also affiliated with the Charlotte-based Immigrant Advocacy Program. Besides answering questions posed to him by the laborers, he also translated questions and transmitted information from Alice Foltz of Wellspring United Church of Christ, which sponsors the forum.

"We are very concerned now, especially because the economic conditions are not good for you, and we want to find out if there are ways we can make things better," said Foltz to the workers. "We're also concerned about your safety and security in the community."

Foltz noted that, at the earlier meeting, someone spoke to them about bicycle and pedestrian safety, as well as who to contact when they have problems with authorities. And she and Bill Threlkeld, Reston Interfaith's Neighborhood Resources director, distributed reflective armbands for the men to wear while riding their bicycles after dark, plus reflective stickers for their backpacks.

Foltz also advised them that, the following Wednesday morning, native-Spanish-speaking forum representative Connie Rojas would be at the corner where the laborers gather, outside the library, waiting for work. "So if you have some problems or questions we can help with, she'll be ready to pass on some information," said Foltz. "She can also tell you about services available to you."

IN ADDITION, Foltz mentioned the Grace Ministries program at



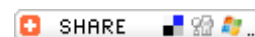
Photo by Bonnie Hobbs/Centre View
Edgar Aranda and Alice Foltz discussed resources available to the workers.



Photo by Bonnie Hobbs/Centre View
Alice Foltz listens while Bill Threlkeld answers a question from a day laborer.



Photo by Bonnie Hobbs/Centre View
Some 90 day laborers attended the meeting with the Centreville Immigration Forum.



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Centreville United Methodist Church, explaining that the workers and their families could receive free food, clothing and diapers there. And Threlkeld discussed Reston Interfaith's emergency services and self-sufficiency program, as well as its food bank where they may obtain groceries once a month.

Aranda told the laborers that, if they have problems with employers refusing to pay them for work they've done, his organization has two lawyers to help them. He then passed out booklets containing information and phone numbers to help the workers deal with various situations and telling them their rights in the workplace. He also gave them small notepads in which to write the name and license-plate number of any person picking them up for work, in case they have problems getting paid what they've been promised.

"I wonder if anyone needs help with legal paperwork, such as the documents needed to obtain work permits," said Foltz. "If you know some people who have this problem, we know some people who can help." In response, one man said they need someone to help them file taxes.

Aranda spoke of a future march about immigration reform in Washington, D.C., and he had Foltz tell the men about the ESL classes available to them at many of the local churches. "In the library, you can also meet with free tutors, one on one," she said. One day laborer told the others about the books, Internet and newspapers they can also use for free in Centreville's library.

Then library manager Patricia White Williams came in and said the library has books, newspapers and magazines in Spanish. "We also have books that will help you with the U.S. citizenship test and with learning English," she said. "You can get a free library card; just fill out an application with your name and address on it. [Then] you can check out books, DVDs and books for children, and you can learn whatever you'd like. Your library card also allows you to have Internet access twice a day, at least 30 minutes per time."

Williams said the library offers an ESL conversation group, Saturdays, from 4-5 p.m., and an ESL book group that meets every week. "There's also a one-on-one English group where you can practice English with one person, four times a month," she said. "If you have kids, we have homework help, plus an online homework tutor."

FOLTZ THEN told the laborers about the previous meetings they've had about immigrants in the local area. "Some people were angry," she said. "But some of this tension and anger had to do with the election. And there's also more tension because the economy is difficult for many people."

"But we're trying to help people realize that immigrants are not a threat to the community," she continued. "And I think that, when people in the community know about your stories, it makes it easier for them to accept you."

Foltz warned the laborers, however, about the importance of following the rules. Therefore, she said, "Cross streets where you're supposed to, so people don't get angry. Although sometimes it's hard to know what the rules are, so we hope to help you with this."

Noting the "no loitering" signs that have been placed outside the library, the workers said these signs made them feel bad. So Threlkeld advised them that, if they're on public property, they have a right to be there, as long as they're not blocking pedestrian or vehicular traffic.

Regarding legal matters, Aranda said the DMV works with ICE to verify people's identities. He also told the workers that, if they're arrested, they have the right to remain silent. "Be quiet – don't say anything," said Aranda. "And don't carry false documents because that's a crime."

In answer to a worker's question, Threlkeld explained why the day labor center in Herndon closed, and another man asked when there'd be a day-labor center in Centreville. "Many people at our meetings think it would be a good idea, but we don't have the money or place," replied Foltz. "So I don't think it's possible right now, but we won't forget about it."



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