

Helping Local Day Laborers
Forum connects immigrant workers with services.

By Bonnie Hobbs
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In their continuing efforts to help the local immigrant population, members of the Centreville Immigration Forum met recently with a group of Hispanic day laborers to share information and advice. They also invited guest speakers.

"If you need food, financial assistance or shelter, call this number — 703-222-0880 — and we have Spanish-speaking social workers who'll give you a call," said Ibrahim Mohamed, a social worker with Fairfax County's Department of systems Management for Human Services. "If you don't have a place to live, the weather is cold and you need a place to sleep, you can come to a hypothermia shelter."

Suzie Guillen, who works with Mohamed, told the day laborers about medical services available to them in the county and told them they could go to clinics in Reston, Bailey's Crossroads and Alexandria.

"The criteria for using these clinics is that you have no medical insurance and are low-income," added Mohamed. "And we don't ask your immigration status. But you do have to verify that you live in Fairfax County; someone with a lease or a utility bill can write a letter on your behalf. Even if you have a job that offers health insurance, but the premium is too high — more than 7 percent of your disposable income — the clinic will cover you."

One worker said all he had was a birth certificate from his native country of El Salvador, and Mohamed said that was fine to use as ID. Mohamed also told the men that he links people with the services and resources they need and that he works with people of all income levels. "Times are tough for everyone," he said. "We have county employees who call us for help because they can't make ends meet."

NEXT, BOTH Dan Choi and Arnaldo Borja with the Legal Aid Justice Center in Falls Church, which advocates for immigrants, addressed the workers in Spanish. Borja talked about his own work experiences in the U.S., and Choi told the day laborers his



Photo by Bonnie Hobbs/Centre View

Day laborers listen to advice given to them at a Centreville Immigration Forum meeting.



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Ibrahim Mohamed, a social worker with Fairfax County's Department of systems Management for Human Services.



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office could help them if an employer doesn't pay them.

Borja also told the men to talk to each other and share their feelings to alleviate their stress. He also warned them, "If someone treats you wrong, you can't do the same thing."

He then passed out a small, blue booklet containing phrases and bits of sentences in both Spanish and English that could prove important to them. A sample conversation is as follows: "You owe me \$200," "Me debes \$200;" "I'll pay you tomorrow," "Te pagare mañana;" "I need the money today," "Necesito el dinero hoy."

"People think they're going to come to the U.S. for a short while, make money and go home — but it doesn't happen like that," said Borja. "They get stuck here because people back home are depending on them financially. But the competition for jobs is hard here."

He also told them that he, too, is a victim of prejudice simply because he's Hispanic and looks it. So, he said, "When I go to a grocery store, security follows me because they think I'm going to steal something."

Also speaking was Nohemy Miranda, pedestrian outreach coordinator with Fairfax County's Department of Transportation. She told the men to cross streets at corners and use reflectors at night. She advised them to wear helmets when riding their bikes and to "be conscious of what you're wearing at nighttime so motorists can see you."

On a night well below freezing, one of the men said he'd been sleeping under a bridge. The problem, said Miranda, is that "The shelters are too far away here, and they don't have transportation." Borja said the day laborers "need to find someone to trust — even if it's just one, good friend to share things with." He also told them to "have faith" and not be afraid of responsibility."

He then gave the men his phone number and told them to call if they have a problem and he'd try to solve it. Lastly, he encouraged them to learn English for their own good. "Then you could sign and understand contracts," said Borja. "Study and try to learn English while you're waiting for jobs."

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