

Seeking Help for Immigrants  
Local residents continue efforts to assist day laborers.

By Bonnie Hobbs  
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The Centreville Immigration Forum keeps reaching out its hand to help the local, immigrant community, but it could use some help from area residents.

One way would be by donating diapers and clothing to Centreville United Methodist Church's (CUMC) Grace Ministries program, held the second Saturday morning of each month. At a recent Grace Ministries' session, volunteers didn't have enough of these items to meet the demand.

"We ran out of diapers," said CUMC's Joe Gillen during a Forum meeting at Centreville Presbyterian Church. "So if anyone has access to them, please let us know. We also need men's small- and medium-size shirts, plus volunteers, the night before, to help sort clothes and prepare coffee." Spanish-speaking people are also needed during the ministry; call 703-830-2684.

The church has also been passing the word to others. Barb Shaiko, who runs CUMC's Grace Ministries, told the Rev. Eugene Johnson at Mt. Olive Baptist Church about the program, and Gillen spoke to people at Shepard's Gate and Chantilly Bible Church.

AL FUERTES TEACHES a course on Conflict, Trauma and Healing at GMU and, as part of it, he's having his students interact with Centreville day laborers. "They talk with them outside the [Centreville Regional] library, and my students really enjoy the experience," he said. "They're learning the stories of struggle, hardships and challenges, and also how the day laborers manage to cope and transcend against all odds, despite what's going on."

Most of the workers are from Guatemala, with some from Honduras and Mexico. The students talk with them, one morning a week, plus one Sunday afternoon a month. "The men are so happy to tell their stories, and then we discuss them in class," said Fuertes. "It's a great experience for everyone and, so far, the response is very encouraging."

It started with five students and grew to 15. "I'm excited about it," said Fuertes. "And it's wonderful for the day laborers to realize they can be



Photo by Bonnie Hobbs/Centre View  
Alice Foltz, Centreville Immigration Forum



Photo by Bonnie Hobbs/Centre View  
Al Fuertes's students are helping the day laborers.



Photo by Bonnie Hobbs/Centre View  
Police Officer Dalton Becker, with the Sully District Station.



resources for the students, and not just beneficiaries [of other people's help]."

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They visit with each other, a few hours at a time. Initially, the men were reluctant to talk to the students. But once a rapport was established, things worked out well. Fuertes said they may even be able to teach his students Spanish. He said the sessions also give his students an opportunity to raise questions and, said Fuertes, "To me, that's also a sign of success."

Alice Foltz of Wellspring United Church of Christ said that, perhaps, various church groups might also like to hear the workers' stories. Additionally, she said, "I see this project also as a way to strengthen the mental health of the day laborers, who often feel isolated."

Wellspring pays a Hispanic woman named Connie Rojas to tell these immigrants about services available to them. And through her, said Foltz, "We met a fellow from Guatemala who really wanted to go home. He came to the U.S. on a work visa, his employer went bankrupt and he had no money or place to live. He also had a sick child at home that he was really worried about."

So Foltz's husband Jerry sought help for the man and connected with the Rev. Walter Castro. "He's the pastor of a small, Seventh-Day Adventist church in Chantilly," said Alice Foltz. "He said, 'I'll take care of it,' and he did, with the help of a donation from St. Vincent de Paul. And that's an example of how we can find out the day laborers' issues, if we stay in touch with them."

POLICE OFFICER Dalton Becker, of the Sully District Station, gave the Fairfax County Police Department's perspective on the local immigration issue. "Our chief's stance is that immigration is a federal issue," he said. "We only do status checks where there's a felony, serious misdemeanor or somebody got hurt."

He noted that, within any group, a small number of people can cause problems — and it's the same with the day laborers who collect outside the library and around the Centreville Square Shopping Center.

"Some are drinking, peeing in the shopping center parking lot, hooting and hollering at passing females," said Becker. "But I think it's a small percentage of them. They'll rent a bed in a house and take turns using it. But they can only use it certain hours, so they don't have anyplace to go, other than the library, shopping center or woods."

If a business owner calls the police and complains, he said, "We'll tell them to move along. But you kind of feel for them because they're getting bounced around, and most of them aren't doing anything

wrong."

Centreville business-owner Lauren Kirby suggested the day laborers clean up the shopping-center parking lot in return for and appreciation of being able to stand there, waiting for work. And Foltz praised Fairfax County police and government for all they do for the immigrants — especially since there have been so many problems and such a contentious relationship between these entities and the immigrants in other jurisdictions.

Said Foltz: "These are human beings living among us and, while they are here, we need to relate to them that way." She said she spoke with Gerry Poje, board chairman of FACETS, and that organization wants to connect with the Centreville Immigration Forum and possibly feed any of the day laborers in need of food.

She also mentioned that many, local high-school students want to attend college, but are having difficulties because their parents are undocumented. So Esteban Garces, with the National Capital Immigrant Coalition, said that, "If you're documented and your parents aren't — if you can prove you're independent of your parents and can provide for yourself, you can get in-state tuition."

Jane Kirsch, with Centreville Presbyterian Church, told the group she's working on a list of Centreville-area resources for area churches and organizations to refer to. That way, they could direct immigrants to, for example, hypothermia shelters, legal services, dental care, domestic-violence support, immigration assistance and language programs.

And county social worker Ibrahim Mohamed said a county, Human Services Resource Guide is now online, and there's a dedicated, Human Services phone line for Spanish-speaking people.

"If we all pool our resources together, we are more likely to be able to help each other in this economic climate," said Foltz. "We need to keep caring for the most vulnerable in our society, even though times are tough."



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