

## Cold Weather Changes Immigration Concerns

By Bonnie Hobbs

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With the weather becoming ever-colder, shortly before the Christmas holidays, members of the Centreville Immigration Forum worried that local immigrants might not have places to stay.

"We're aware some day laborers are homeless or near homeless," said Alice Foltz, who leads the CIF. "Some are living in an abandoned house and some rent a bed in a house for a few hours — and these are guys who, a few years ago, were making it. That may be OK during the summer, but not in cold weather." She said the police asked the CIF if there was anything it could do to provide afternoon shelter. But, said Foltz, "That's pretty daunting."

Sarah Allen, a regional director with Fairfax County's Department of Systems Management for Human Services, noted that the Lamb Center in Fairfax provides a hot meal and shelter during daytime, "but transportation would be an issue."

Heather Thomas added that FACETS runs one of the largest hypothermia programs in the county and the churches housing it rotate from week to week. "It's open now and runs until spring," she said. "It's for single adults, 18 and over. Guests come in at 5:30 p.m., register and get a mat and some blankets."

But that's not all FACETS does, said Thomas, who runs the organization's hypothermia shelter program. "Besides preventing hypothermia, we also want to help them so they won't have to keep coming back," she said. "There's a big push for case management to figure out their job situation, help them overcome their problems, find out their housing situation and help them make a plan."

"We link them to resources, and the church provides a hot meal, snacks and fellowship," continued Thomas. "They get a hot breakfast, are given a bag lunch and leave by 7:30 a.m. This year, we're also trying to build their life skills; for example, how to get from point A to point B. We have some bus tokens and vans; churches can provide drivers for them, pick up people in a central location and then drop them off at the church."

LAST YEAR, said Thomas, FACETS and the participating churches provided shelter for 300 different people, mainly men. "Two churches per week see 25-40 people, per church, per night,"



From left, CIF members Kitty Stapleton, George Crossman and Joe Gillen listen while Heather Thomas makes a point.



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she said. "But it takes a lot of resources and manpower — including overnight volunteers, plus people to make meals, etc. — planning, collaboration and cooperation."

In addition, she said, there's often distrust by undocumented workers. "They worry, 'Are you going to report me?'" said Thomas. "And sometimes, problems escalate between the documented and undocumented workers, so we have to diffuse them."

Jerry Foltz said many of Centreville's day laborers only have bikes for transportation. But Thomas said, "If they know a hypothermia shelter is available, they'll find a way to get there. People come to us from all over. They'd call the FACETS main number to find out where the shelter is, the hours and the bus routes."

For more information, call 703-352-5090 or see [www.FACETScares.org](http://www.FACETScares.org).

Added Allen: "Police dispatchers and mental-health personnel also have this phone number, so there's backup." And Alice Foltz said it would be good to spread the word about this resource through Centreville United Methodist Church's (CUMC) Grace Ministry and via Connie Rojas, the CIF's Spanish-speaking liaison to the day laborers.

"It's important to know that Fairfax County is supporting this," said Alice Foltz. "And the support this immigration forum has received from the Sully District police and [Supervisor] Michael Frey has been magnificent. They said it's helpful to them to know that community groups like us are working with a population that's difficult for them to work with."

THE CIF ALSO discussed immigration reform, and Edgar Aranda — who works in this field and is an advocate with the Legal Aid Justice Center in Falls Church — shared a synopsis of the Immigration Reform Bill that U.S. Rep. Luis Gutierrez's (Ill.) was preparing. And, said Aranda, "If people have papers, they'll have a better chance to get jobs and help the community."

Foltz said this bill tells immigrants that, to obtain American citizenship, they need to have good English skills, pay any back taxes owed and have their documents in order. So, she said, "People in our ESL classes can encourage their students to keep going forward with their studies because, if this bill passes, knowing English is going to be even more important to them than ever."

She said Gutierrez is soliciting support for his bill, all over the country. But, said Foltz, "Citizens have to get involved and support it. It's not good for the health of this country to have workers who don't have rights."

CUMC member Joe Gillen said, "The problem is, they're trying to solve the whole thing, all at once. They need to do it, piece by

piece."

But, warned Aranda, "If they don't solve it by spring, it'll be difficult, because then elections will be coming."



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