

CONNECTION

Worker Center Opening Planned for September

By Bonnie Hobbs
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The Centreville Immigration Forum (CIF) was initially begun as a way to connect people and organizations that worked with Centreville's immigrant population. It provided ESOL classes to teach English to the day laborers and eventually evolved into a group focused on creating a worker center for them.

The CIF is now interviewing potential staff members, raising money and making plans to open this facility — to be called Centreville Labor Resource Center (CLARC) — sometime in September.

“We’ve made excellent progress,” said CIF President Alice Foltz.

“We’ve had good support from many volunteers in the community, plus new volunteers in the last couple months. And we believe that, when the center opens, we’ll be ready to operate it successfully.”

Currently, day laborers looking for jobs congregate outside the Centreville Square Shopping Center, on the outskirts of Centewood Plaza and near the Centreville Regional Library. But store owners said their presence discouraged customers from coming to their businesses. And some moms were uncomfortable bringing their children to a library with men standing outside of it.

So Al Dwoskin, who owns the Centreville Square Shopping Center, volunteered to provide a space for a worker center if the CIF would run it. The facility will get the workers off the streets and provide an organized way for employers to connect with them.

Although CLARC will be within his shopping center, it will be housed in a storefront in an area away from most customer traffic. It will also be large enough to accommodate all the laborers indoors. The resource center will be open Monday-Saturday, from 6 a.m.-noon. CIF volunteers will participate in the day-to-day operation, under the guidance of a full-time, professional director.

“Over a two-month period, we interviewed people for this position before our personnel committee, worker committee and the CIF Board of Directors,” said Foltz. “We had 19 excellent applications, but the person we selected was just outstanding.”

While declining at this point to reveal the potential director's name, she said, “We decided to hire a person who we believe has great skills and capabilities, as well as experience with similar work in other areas. But we won't formally offer the position until all the funds are raised.”

Foltz did say, however, that the director will be bilingual. Since the day laborers are Hispanic, it's a requirement for all jobs at the center. She



CIF President Alice Foltz

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also stressed that the director-to-be has experience, not only with management, but also with an immigrant population and grant-writing. Meanwhile, the CIF is also working on several other things in tandem to prepare for the center's opening — deciding on support staff, figuring out how many workers it will serve and tending to the myriad details involved in running such an entity. And, of course, said Foltz, “We need to complete our fund-raising, in part, to make sure we can hire support staff.”

The CIF may hire one full-time or nearly full-time assistant director. But its Board of Directors and the center director together will make the decision on the support staff. Said Foltz: “Even though we haven't advertised for these positions, we already have about 10 applications.” She said the support staff will assist with the job matching between the employers and workers and will help schedule and oversee the volunteers. The CIF has already trained 35 volunteers and will hold another training session shortly before the center opens its doors. This summer, two student volunteers — one from Pennsylvania and one from New Jersey — have interned with the CIF, doing counts of the day laborers. “We need to know how many folks are on the corner in the morning, how many employers pick them up and how many workers get jobs,” explained Foltz. “This information will help us plan well for when the center opens.”

Although the facility is not anticipated to be open on Sunday, Foltz said worker counts are also being made on Sundays, too, “because people in the community are concerned that they'd be there when the center would be closed.” The interns have also spent a few mornings each week talking with the workers about how CLARC will operate, telling them about its benefits and describing how the job distribution will work.

There'll eventually be signs directing potential employers to the resource center. And the CIF has already given the workers flyers to hand to their employers, so they, too, will know about the new center. The space, itself, is also being readied. Needed repairs are already underway and, said Foltz, “A good number of furnishings have been donated by a lot of generous folks.”

Regarding finances, she said the CIF needs about \$45,000 more for salaries and benefits for the paid staff. “We've raised about \$50,000 and have some more pledged,” said Foltz. “Our total, annual budget is \$234,000, including the cost of the space, utilities — for which Dwoskin is paying, supplies, furnishings and salaries for the director and assistant director.

CIF members have visited other, similar centers and its directors to obtain guidance about how best to operate its own facility. It's also prepared the forms that both workers and employers will fill out, as well as flyers and informational brochures for when the center debuts.

On June 21, CIF members considered the staff hiring-timeline and also discussed answers to tough questions they'll receive once the center is up and running. These included operational, practical and philosophical

questions that local residents may pose, such as, “Will it solve the problem of day laborers standing outside waiting for work?”

“We’re certainly convinced the center will benefit the entire community,” said Foltz. “It will provide a safe place for the workers to wait for employment, off the street, so it will reduce traffic congestion. And it will resolve folks’ concerns about [their own] safety and loitering.”

Many of the workers have wives and young children to support, and all they ask is fair pay for an honest day’s labor. But as things stand now, they have no recourse if they toil all day for an employer who then refuses to pay them. But once the new facility is operational, that should no longer be a problem. Said Foltz: “Because we’ll know who the employers who hire them are, the center will provide a system to make sure the workers are paid fairly.”

She said the workers will be inside the center and volunteers will greet the employers, possibly outside the entrance, as they arrive. In addition, the workers will receive training and classes there on English, taxes, job skills and financial management. Health screening for things such as blood pressure and diabetes may also be offered.

For more information about the center, to volunteer or to donate, go to www.centrevilleimmigrationforum.org. or call (this summer) 703-257-4111. Besides being excited about this project finally coming to fruition, Foltz hopes it will be accepted and welcomed by the residents.

“One of the community’s concerns is that the workers won’t use the center,” she said. “But that’s not true. They’re enthusiastic about it and see the benefits very clearly. If anyone has any worries, I’d definitely encourage people to find out firsthand what’s going on by volunteering.”

The public will be notified in advance of the opening and will also be invited to attend an open house there. “We’re not trying to solve the national immigration problem,” said Foltz. “This center has no government funding — so this is a private solution to a public problem. And in many ways, this is a model for the way many problems can be solved.”



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