



LOCAL/NEWS City by City:
Plano

Day labor centers have cities walking a fine line

Some suburbs loath to aid illegal immigrants; others see benefits

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By STELLA M. CHÁVEZ / The Dallas Morning News

John Wesley says day labor centers serve a valuable purpose. He's found both work and workers in such places.

"[Cities] definitely need something organized like that," Mr. Wesley said at a Lewisville shopping center where he was looking for someone to hand out fliers for his lawn care business.

Others, like Brian Burns, don't see the value at all – especially if they involve taxpayer money.

"People are breaking federal law," said Mr. Burns, a member of the Texas chapter of the Minuteman Project, which favors increased border security.

"You can't help people who are in this country illegally."

Cities around the country are in a delicate position as they grapple with a growing day labor workforce, which sometimes includes people who are in the country illegally.

Some cities, like Plano and Fort Worth, have opted to open centers to get workers off street corners and out of shopping center parking lots.

Others have stayed away from the issue.

But that hasn't stopped people in need of jobs from setting up unofficial day labor sites.

As the battle over immigration reform continues, cities are feeling the heat from anti-illegal immigrant groups, who question the role of cities that open such centers.

In Lewisville, the issue of whether to build a day labor center has come up numerous times. Mayor Pro Tem Greg Tierney says his city is closer than ever to a decision. He knows it may not be popular.

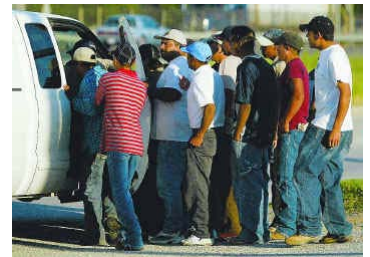
"I understand the delicacy of it because there are strong opinions about it both ways," Mr. Tierney said.

"But I think we as a city do need to move forward."

He said a centrally located building or shelter could help reduce the number of complaints about workers standing on the side of the road or in shopping center parking lots.

Lewisville Assistant Police Chief Russ Kerbow said his department received 14 calls between Nov. 1 and April 30 about day laborers trespassing, but there have been no arrests or major incidents.

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NATHAN HUNSINGER/DMN
Day laborers get into a truck at a work site in Lewisville. City officials are scouting sites for a centrally located facility, saying a decision could come in the next couple of months.

Only if someone refuses to leave private property would they be subject to criminal trespassing, he said.

Complaints about day laborers are something Chris Newman hears about a lot as the legal programs coordinator of the National Day Laborer Organizing Network in Los Angeles.

He said it's a misperception that day laborers – regardless of legal status – can't solicit for jobs.

"Day laborers have the First Amendment right to look for work on streets and sidewalks," he said. "The reality is that unfortunately, on any given day, there's 117,000 day laborers looking for work.

"Day laborers have become a fixture across the country."

He suggests that cities involve workers, as well as community organizations, in discussions about potential day labor sites. He said workers are often left out of the process.

In Lewisville, Mr. Tierney has sought the input of some residents and business owners such as Rebecca Leal Behnke, who owns and operates the Dallas Tortilla and Tamale Factory in Lewisville.

"I told him it's about time," said Ms. Behnke, who believes the city should have addressed the issue long ago.

"Lewisville is a city that has a lot of individual business owners that rely on the backs of immigrants."

Plano had the area's first day labor center, and it is likely one of the busiest. On any given day, between 150 and 250 people show up. They arrive as early as 6:30 a.m. and punch in with a card issued in their name. A computer then randomly selects the order in which the names are drawn.

Workers are matched with employers according to skills.

Plano police Officer Elias Cuellar said having a day labor site is better than not having one.

"It became downright dangerous," Officer Cuellar said. "Some of them would run out on the street and could have gotten run over."

Denton took a different approach with its day labor site.

In 1996, a group of Hispanic leaders formed the nonprofit Denton Humanitarian Association and raised money to build an open shelter for workers. The Texas Department of Transportation leased some land to the city, which in turn leased it to the nonprofit.

"Ours was very unique from other cities like Fort Worth and Plano and Garland in that the city didn't put any money into it," said John Cabrales, Denton's public information officer.

Today, the city's parks department mows the property and cleans up the garbage. The city also pays the water bill for a water fountain at the site, but the property is not staffed.

Mr. Cabrales said that could change. The city has been in talks with the Texas Workforce Commission to staff the place. He noted that the workforce commission – not the city – would pay the person's salary.

Mr. Tierney said Lewisville staff members have been looking at a couple of potential sites for a center. He said a decision could come in the next two or three months.

Jose Angel, 38, says a day labor center is a good idea. He hardly takes a day off from looking for work, often visiting the unofficial site in Lewisville on Saturdays.

He said a day labor center would be a safer alternative for workers, who regularly approach cars on the side of the road or in the parking lot.

"It's dangerous," said Mr. Angel, who emigrated from Mexico in 1988. "It would get people off the street."

But he also understands why people are opposed.

The opposition has been more evident elsewhere. This month in Herndon, Va., a mayor and two Town Council members who supported a day labor center were unseated by challengers who favored more restrictions at the center.

In Burbank, Calif., city officials required a new Home Depot to build a day labor site as a condition of the store's approval. The company has a nonsolicitation policy, but in this case, the company followed the city's orders. The site is run by Catholic Charities.

"Obviously, the day labor center is a large community issue," said Ron DeFeo, Home Depot spokesman. "It's far greater than the Home Depot or any local organization or local government."

Mr. Cabrales said it's no surprise cities are being scrutinized.

"They're open to criticism for using taxpayer dollars to do something for a group that doesn't have a strong voice in the community," he said. "Regardless of what action cities take, they're going to be criticized."

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