

## **We Can Do Better in Santa Cruz County (Santa Cruz Sentinel 7/20/08)**

Early every morning, groups of able-bodied men gather at three or four locations in Santa Cruz County to wait on the curbsides in hopes of obtaining a few hours of casual employment. These men, 200 to 400 each day, are mostly young Mexican and Central American immigrants with limited English language skills.

They are not a menacing presence; they are our neighbors and co-workers, people who for the most part are at great pains to stay out of trouble. They've come here to work hard and help raise their families out of poverty, just like the ancestors of most of the rest of us; and they constitute an important segment of our county's work force.

If these men have been lucky today, they're out right now earning \$50 or a \$100 for what is generally some pretty heavy work. If not, they'll go home with empty pockets. In the best circumstances they'll make a good impression on an employer who can offer a few weeks or more of full-time work.

In the worst cases, they'll work all day without food, water or breaks and be paid less than was promised, or sometimes nothing at all.

Every morning Santa Cruz County householders, contractors, landscapers and others head for the curbsides in search of willing workers to perform essential tasks for low wages with no benefits. These potential employers have to reach across wide language and cultural barriers to explain what they need, determine which of the eager workers before them are most likely to provide it, and settle on terms of employment. For them, as for the workers, the whole transaction is a crapshoot.

If these employers are lucky today, they've got some steady, capable workers with more skills and understanding than they expected them to have. If not, they're frustrated and will think twice about looking for a day laborer next time they need something done.

Some workers and employers claim this system works just fine. They're used to it; they've made it work for them. For others, it's the pits. In either case it's a sorry substitute for a rational, human system that connects willing workers to people who need their services.

Curbside hiring violates the dignity of the person, the dignity of work itself, and the fundamental human right to reliable employment, decent working conditions and a living wage. For employers it is too often confusing and unpredictable. We can do a whole lot better than that here in Santa Cruz County.

More than 200 communities including several in the Bay Area, have addressed these problems by establishing Day Laborer Worker Centers. Besides providing protections and better enforcement of workplace safety standards for workers, these centers enable workforce development strategies that help day laborers make the transition from the informal economy into permanent jobs. There are many models to choose from, ranging

from the full-fledged hiring hall linked to such services as English language instruction, down to tents erected in parking lots with coffee machines and porta-potties. It's no trick to figure out the system that can work best for us.

An effort to explore this possibility was launched a year ago by Leadership Santa Cruz County. They convened a public meeting in May, 2007, to consider the subject, from which emerged a task force with representatives from local churches, education, trade unions, government and nonprofits to move the idea forward. Day laborers were surveyed about perceived needs. Anecdotal information was collected from employers, and enough need and momentum were found to justify a countywide planning process.

The Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County was selected, due to its expertise in the provision of anti-poverty programs focused on job training, to carry out this planning process. A reputable consultant whose experience includes worker center development in Phoenix and San Jose has been selected to assist in this work.

Community outreach is an essential element of this process, and there will be several opportunities for public discussion along the way. By spring of next year, we expect to have a full-blown proposal to put forward.

Santa Cruz County is fair-minded and generous in spirit, as the supervisors' recent success in sidestepping cuts to human care services made clear. To reach out to day laborers in that same spirit is an investment in long-term economic development, and in the quality of life for all residents of this county.