“It is a place of hope: hope that is created as they come together seeking solidarity.”
— Nancy Rosas, Coordinator, El Centro Women’s Project

By Ted Rinehart and Dr. Tony Robinson
With Emily Lennon, Payam Kharimkhani and Refugio Perez
MISSION STATEMENT

El Centro Humanitario promotes the rights and well-being of day laborers in Denver through education, job skills and leadership development, united action and advocacy.

Our goals are to develop a sense of community and self sufficiency among workers and to foster worker ownership over El Centro Humanitario.

El Centro
Accomplishments:

- Denver’s leading organization serving immigrant day laborers.
- Governed by elected “workers’ committee” of day laborers.
- 250 individuals register monthly for services.
- Minimum wage of $10 an hour insured.
- Percent of workers receiving jobs through El Centro increases by 20% since 2004.
- Range of ESL, computer, leadership development and know your rights workshops offered.
- Pro bono legal clinic faculty wins 2002 American Bar Association award for nation’s best community legal clinic.
- Women’s program wins 2006 Denver Women’s Commission excellence award.
- Helped draft and pass Denver’s new "Wage Theft" ordinance.
They are the poorest of the poor, gathering every day on a northeast Denver street corner to seek work so that they may survive and send money to their families. They are Denver’s immigrant day laborers, who have fled desperate poverty south of the border. They provide Denver with some of its most back-breaking work, often working for minuscule wages and under dangerous conditions. For years, these immigrants have lived and worked off the street corner, without shelter in the scorching sun or chilling cold, without protection from unscrupulous employers who sometimes refuse to pay wages, and without access to bathrooms, water or telephones. But recently, things have changed for the better as workers have joined with community advocates to lease an old warehouse at 2260 California street, where the “El Centro Humanitario Para Los Trabajadores” opened its doors on June 1, 2002.

Affectionately known as “El Centro” among the day laborers, the “Humanitarian Center for Workers” operates with a mission to provide immigrant day laborers with a safe and dignified gathering place to seek employment and to provide workers with cultural and leadership programs. Spearheaded by the American Friends Service Committee, El Centro has been supported by a wide range of community groups, churches, and city officials. Members from these groups, together with street workers, spent weeks of volunteer labor repairing and repainting the site, and the excitement was palpable on June 1, when the garage door rolled up at 6:00 a.m., and El Centro opened its doors to business. For the first time, workers had a place to gather and await jobs, employers had a safe place to meet and hire workers, and Denver residents had a solution to the crisis of the street-corner labor market.

What is our business at El Centro? When hard-working, but homeless, workers seek a bit of respite, it is El Centro’s business to welcome them with a place to rest, with refreshments, and with a bathroom. When “Miguel” suffered permanent nerve damage to his arm at an unsafe construction site, and was ignored by his employer, El Centro’s business was to insure that Miguel received an adequate personal injury award so that he could rebuild his life. When “Roberto” worked for four days straight, and then was stiffed by his unscrupulous employer, El Centro’s job was to provide advocacy and wage claim services so that Roberto received his pay. When “Jose” experienced a life-threatening rupture of his appendix, it was El Centro’s business to secure medical attention and to insure that his family back in Mexico was aware of the situation. When area residents and business complain of an unsavory street scene as immigrant gather on the corner seeking jobs, it is Centro’s job to develop solutions, to give workers a place to gather off the street, and to foster healthy dialogue between area residents and the street community. El Centro is home to all these workers, and there is no other place in Denver quite like it.

—Minsun Ji
Founder and Director,
El Centro Humanitario
ABANDONED IN THE DARK

In 1998, a brain injured homeless day laborer was found wandering inner-city Denver near the corner of California Street and Park Avenue. He had been picked up earlier on this corner for a day’s work as a casual roofer, and had been injured by falling off the roof. The employer, wishing to avoid responsibility, dropped the drastically injured worker off in the dead of night and sped away into obscurity. The day laborer never regained full use of his faculties, and was resigned to a life of misery, shuffling around downtown Denver with a broken body. The employer was never located.

El Centro Humanitario emerged as a response to this incident, and as a more general response to similar challenges faced by dozens of similar day laborers every day in inner-city Denver. El Centro Humanitario Para Los Trabajadores, the Humanitarian Center for Workers, began on the Denver street corner where impoverished individuals from all over the world gather to seek daily work and survival, just across the street from the Mexican bus depots on Park Avenue West and California Streets, in the shadow of the glittering wealth of Coors Field and Lower Downtown Denver.

THE CORNER

In recent years, Denver has grown to become one of America’s leading destinations for immigrants from south of the border. Many of these immigrants are desperately impoverished, having lost their livelihood, land and even their families to the forces of globalization that have ravaged Latin American countries and produced waves of unemployment and declining wages throughout the region. Fleeing poverty, starvation and even political violence in their home countries, these immigrants show up in Denver, seeking daily work in order to survive and perhaps to send a few dollars to their families remaining in their home countries.

Though not all street-corner day laborers are undocumented, a great many are. The Pew Hispanic Center estimates that there are about twelve million undocumented workers in America, and the number is growing. These workers are new to their surroundings, they live day-to-day off their spot labor, they are vulnerable due to their legal status, and they live in disorganized surroundings with little access to resources such as schools, unions, or courtrooms. As a result, they face tremendous difficulty in organizing to enforce their legal rights as human beings and as workers. These day laborers face the worst fallout from a period of economic restructuring that devastates

Day Laborers: The Facts

- Immigrant day laborers are growing nation-wide, but most (42%) are in the West.
- Every day, nearly 120,000 people in America seek work as a day laborer.
- Average annual income is below $10,000 a year.
- Most day laborers were once full-time workers, displaced by economic changes in their home countries.
- Day laborers are active in the community; 50% attend church regularly; 20% are members of sports leagues.
- 90% of Denver’s day laborers report incidents of non-payment of wages; 50% nationwide report that they are commonly denied food or water breaks while working.

Source: Day Laborer Research Institute; El Centro street survey
the economies in developing countries as corporate agriculture and sweatshop industries drive thousands from their rural roots with no options but subsistence industrial jobs, and too few of them. As a result, desperate workers from south of the border journey to the United States, where they become an exploited day laborer work force, competing for work with a besieged domestic workforce.

**American Friends Service Committee Reaches Out**

In the years before El Centro began, the American Friends Services Committee, a Quaker organization, reached out to marginalized day laborer communities around the Park Avenue West and Stout Street area. In 2000, AFSC hired a new staff member, Min-sun Ji (a former Korean labor activist and past union organizer with Denver’s local chapter of the Service Employees International Union) to head up the day laborer program. Min-sun offered workers coffee, juice and pastries, and talked with them about what they needed. As Min-sun said about those days, “In 2000, I was the main person from the American Friends Service Committee organizing day laborers. I started bringing coffee to the corner where they waited for employers. Back then, I didn’t even know ‘hola.’ I was pretty new to this country. I had a student intern doing translation for me for a while. Workers were my teachers; they corrected my Spanish.”

**Ideas from the Street: An Indoor Center?**

As workers began to open up to Min-sun, a few of them remembered the time they had spent in Los Angeles. Workers recalled that in L.A., there were indoor centers where immigrant day laborers could go to find work, in addition to receiving services like legal help and English education. Other workers recalled similar centers that had opened in Seattle and San Francisco. In these centers, workers didn’t compete to offer the lowest wage to anonymous employers, but stood together in kind of union, demanding a dignified wage and building systems to hold both the workers and the employers accountable. The centers also were political education and advocacy centers, where workers could learn of their legal rights, and learn how to collectively organize in the American system to defend their rights.

Denver had no such center, which made it difficult for day laborers to find consistent and safe work, from reputable employers. Homeless immigrant workers also lacked any kind of local...
“Through organizing on a local level, workers learn to become good political analysts. They grow and start to influence others. We see day laborers as people who are capable of acting for themselves.”
— Pablo Alvarado, National Organization for Day Laborers

“settlement house,” where they could gather among friends to share their experiences, receive services like English classes, and in general receive assistance in understanding the Denver community. An indoor center, where the Denver community could reach out to and learn from the newly arriving immigrants, and where the immigrant workers could receive services and build collective strength from each other, was beginning to look like the best option for the day laborers.

An organized worker’s committee emerged from the street corner which began meeting twice a week at a local non-profit to draft the by-laws and vision of what “El Centro” could be about. From the start, the vision was that the indoor center would not simply be a service center, but would be a place where workers themselves structured the programs, did the majority of organizing among their peers on the corner, and built self-advocacy programs where workers could learn from each other and rely on each other, rather than competing for scarce jobs on the corner.

THE EL CENTRO PROJECT BEGINS

El Centro’s vision began to take shape. Workers voted that they would stand together to enforce a minimum wage of $8 an hour at their center. If someone was not paid for their work, workers vowed to collectively picket the employer’s house or place of business. The center would be governed by an organized workers committee with elected leaders, and staffed by a coalition of volunteers with AFSC support.

As word of the El Centro vision spread among the community, supporters emerged. The local Carpenters’ union was supportive because when workers got hired off of the street for $4 an hour it hurt the organized carpenters; the carpenters union felt an indoor hiring hall would help immigrant workers demand higher wages and become better introduced to America’s organized labor movement. A few Denver University law students with a sense of social responsibility had come to learn of the plight of Denver’s day laborers, and they sought a strategy to offer pro bono legal services to El Centro workers, as part of their legal education. Professors Tony Robinson and Jerry Jacks, who directed the University of Colorado at Denver’s Westside Outreach Center and Urban Citizen service-learning projects, stepped up with plans to channel interested students into volunteer and paid internships with the El Centro project.

With growing community support, the quest for a physical space for the El Centro project began. The majority of workers that come into Denver on the Mexican bus lines get dropped off in downtown Denver’s northeast neighborhoods, near Five Points and Curtis Park. It made sense that the site...
should be in this area of Denver, but most everything was too expensive, and no landlord wanted to rent to a non-proven community coalition of day laborer supporters in any case. By the end of 2001, El Centro was a vision without space, funding, or staff—but everything was about to change.

BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME

There was one vacant building that looked as though it might have some potential in the area, but no one expected that the small El Centro group would be able to secure it. A large, bright pink warehouse on Park Avenue West and California Street (one block from the day laborer street corner) was vacant and was up for lease. Owned by Fred Pasternack, a retired Denver pawnshop owner, the warehouse was open to El Centro if they could come up with the $2500 a month.

Mr. Pasternack wanted to know what kind of money El Centro had so that they could guarantee him rent, but being a volunteer organization off the street, El Centro didn’t have much—all they could muster from limited grants from the Buck Foundation and the Chinook Fund was enough to cover the first few months rent.

Still, a meeting was arranged with Mr. Pasternack to outline the importance of El Centro’s cause and to ask to please be considered. Fred Pasternack was moved by the appeal, and let the El Centro team know that he was willing to open his building to their project.

El Centro now had a site, but only had two month’s rent guaranteed, had no money for staff and a building in severe disrepair. The warehouse site had been previously used as a car repair shop, was full of broken windows and old auto parts, and was virtually unusable as a place to congregate and organize laborers. Still, it was a start and workers on the street and community supporters rolled up their sleeves and began to fix up the building.

A LITTLE HELP FROM THE MAYOR

El Centro now had a site, but how were they going to use it in such disrepair? Luckily El Centro was able to secure a meeting with Denver Mayor Wellington Webb. Following the presentation of the El Centro vision and their success at locating a site, Mayor Webb decided to support the center with a small grant of $25,000—enough to rent the building for one year. El Centro still had no money for staff, but the grant gave them the op-

“What we need are better rights for all workers, of all countries, and that is what we stand for.”

— Carlos Douglas, National Organization of Day Laborers
Immigrant workers play a huge role in Colorado’s Economy. As long as the United States remains the land of opportunity, they will continue to come. They deserve to be treated fairly.”

— Morgan Smith, El Centro Board Member

portunity to get El Centro started and running. The local councilperson, Elbra Wedgeworth, also stepped up to organize local businesses to donate supplies to refurbish the El Centro site. In the meantime, AFSC continued to dedicate the staff time of Minsun Ji as the lead organizer and interim “director” of the El Centro Humanitario project.

Now with the grant and the supplies, the El Centro group went to work. Workers from the street corner and community volunteers came together for several weeks of rehabilitation work. New paint was applied to the floors and the walls, new windows replaced the shattered ones that had been left behind, donated carpet was laid down, and linoleum was installed.

OPENING DAY

The doors to El Centro opened at 6 A.M on June 1, 2002. From the beginning the majority of the staff was volunteers. Students from CU-Denver’s Westside Outreach Center (a service-learning program) were among the first people to staff the front desks at El Centro. “Students were getting up at 6:00 a.m. to put in their time on the front lines of Denver’s struggles with immigration and labor issues,” Professor Tony Robinson noted. “It was an education much more powerful than mere classroom learning.”

Felicia Hilton, director of Colorado Jobs With Justice, also put in volunteer hours. So did Tim Campion, a community chaplain, and Chris Newman, a law student at Denver University. Minsun Ji from AFSC supervised.

Testimony of Billy Gonzalez at Agoura Hills, California Day Labor Rally (2001)

“Good morning. My name is Billy González and I also earn my living on this corner. The hills behind us have been witnesses to many injustices that we have lived through simply because we were looking for work. At this corner, they have held raids that included a helicopter that flew over our heads. The wind was so strong that it blew us off our feet and rolling down the hill among the rocks, bushes, and the rattlesnakes.

At this corner, they have pulled us out of the bathrooms and the restaurants when we were eating and the have ticketed us and arrested us.

At this corner, they have taken us off the city buses.

At this corner, they have placed us in patrol cars and have expelled us out to Malibu, abandoning us where there is no transportation and we would have to walk long distances to return to our homes.

At this corner, they have pointed their guns at us.

At this corner, they have insulted us, humiliated us, and have discriminated against us.

At this corner, they have robbed us of our dignity, our humanity.

All this and why? Because of an unjust law that has criminalized a human right. The laws have made it a crime to work and earn your daily bread by the sweat of your brow. But with the support and solidarity of all of you and of the community organizations that struggle for the rights of the voiceless in our society, we have to stop the abuses.

Another fundamental reason why we are out here is because our work force keeps the gardens clean and the homes of these communities painted. Our labor force improves the quality of life for the residents in this city. They need us as well. We give thanks to the employers who have come to pick us up. To them, we would like to say we will always be here to serve. …”
the mostly volunteer staff, who had little idea what to expect the day El Centro first opened for business. Would the workers come?

At first, they did not. Because of a combination of suspicion and the simple lack of knowledge about what the center represented, many day laborers continued to stand on the corner in those first days to find work. On the first day that El Centro opened its doors, some forty men continued to stand outside, while only a handful came into the center to give the new hall a chance. As the labor leaders of El Centro stood in the empty center and watched pickup trucks pull up to the corner for a day’s work, there was a growing depression.

Finally, one employer did drive up. He needed a few men to help with painting his house, but only offered to pay them $5 an hour on this scorching hot day. The last thing any of the men at El Centro could afford was to pass on an opportunity to work. But their belief in dignified labor at a fair wage helped them stand firm for their minimum wage—$8 an hour. These initial workers’ leaders stood firm at El Centro, only to watch the employer leave El Centro in anger and go to the street corner to conduct an informal labor auction and find street workers who agreed to paint all day for just $4.00 an hour. It was a depressing situation. No one was sure if the workers on the corner would ever come inside to stand with the emerging workers’ union, or if the daily necessity to find work would win out over long-term organizing for change.

OFF THE CORNER AND INTO EL CENTRO

Over the coming weeks and months, El Centro began to build its reputation and more and more workers came off the corner to stand together for better wages and services at El Centro. El Centro’s workers and community leaders soon began a proactive program of spreading fliers throughout the community, letting residents know of the new labor center and of the availability of quality workers for temporary work at fair wages. A speakers’ bureau sent worker leaders to radio interviews, university classrooms, church congregations, and various neighborhood meetings to introduce the workers center to the Denver community. The local papers began to run articles on this unique labor center, further spreading the word.

As the word spread, more and more employers (most of whom are happy to pay a fair wage and appreciate the orderly placement process at El Centro as compared to the chaotic street corner) began to show up at El Centro for workers. Community volunteers began offering free English classes. Food pantry donations allowed workers to

“Let the workers organize. Let the toilers assemble. Let all thoughtful citizens sustain them, for the future of labor is the future of America.”

— John Lewis,
President, Congress of Industrial Organizations

Carlos Delgado, President of the National Day Labor Organizing Network, addresses the San Francisco Conference, 2001:

“We are all here to teach America about the reality of their society. We are here to teach America that we are a vital part of the American economy, we create a good deal of the national product, and we need to be recognized for our contribution. We are here to empower and represent the most vulnerable in the Latino community, and we must be always aware of who we represent. We must remember that we are not working simply to improve an individual’s wages or create a better job for an individual worker. We are not simply trying to build employment offices. What we need is broad national change; what we need is a broad political solution to help undocumented immigrants across the country. What we need are better rights for all workers, of all countries, and that is what we stand for.”
enjoy refreshments every day while waiting for work. Bathrooms, running water, a small library and indoor shelter from the elements were offered to workers. 

Slowly but surely, workers began to move from the street corner and into El Centro, where they discovered that regular meetings of workers’ themselves were establishing rules at the site, and that El Centro did not charge workers any fee for services. It was a definite improvement over life on the corner, and both workers and employers grew steadily at El Centro.

El Centro became independent

By the end of its first year, El Centro had grown to serve 500-1000 workers every month, and offered an array of programs including the growing workers’ committee, English, computer and construction skills workshops, donations of food, clothing and other supplies, a daily labor lottery six days a week, and a legal clinic. The whole operation was cobbled together with volunteer labor and the part-time supervision of Minsun Ji from AFSC, but things were quickly growing to demand something more.

El Centro’s successes in its first year, and its unique role in meeting a growing Denver need, meant that local and national funders were responding to grant appeals, and El Centro’s budget for support staff was growing. But a full-time director was needed.

The American Friends Service Committee recognized the dramatic growth and future needs of El Centro and agreed to support Minsun Ji in leaving her position with AFSC to become the full-time director of El Centro Humanitario. AFSC also generously agreed to offer a two-year grant to pay for half of Minsun’s full-time salary, during which time El Centro securing enough financial support for the director and a variety of staff positions.

Many foundations stepped up to support El Centro Humanitario. The Buck Family Foundation, the Denver Foundation, the Gay and Lesbian Fund for Colorado, the Western Union Foundation, and the Chinook Fund were among El Centro’s initial supporters. Both federal and municipal government supported El Centro with sizable grants, allowing El Centro to grow its programs. Individual donors from across the Denver community grew with each month, and workers themselves soon adopted a membership dues program, helping to deliver the income needed to keep the center afloat.

With this support, El Centro’s growing staff and programs have made a real impact on the quality of life for Denver’s immigrant day laborers. The number of job placements has grown. The minimum wage for El Centro day laborers is now $10 an hour. El Centro workers have played leadership roles in a variety of local civic actions, including the historic immigrant rallies of 2006. An array of legal, educational, and leadership development programs are
constantly offered at El Centro.

But El Centro still faces substantial challenges. Recent changes in the atmosphere of immigration politics are now making continued funding and public support for the operations of El Centro more difficult.

A CHANGE IN THE TIDE

Not everyone has been supportive of El Centro Humanitario. El Centro’s work in organizing Latino street-workers into a kind of grass roots union hall and human rights center has paralleled the rise of anti-immigration sentiment across the nation and the rise of U.S. Representative Tom Tancredo from Colorado. For years, Tancredo has denounced centers like El Centro, once even threatening to sue the City of Denver for supporting El Centro’s work with undocumented immigrants. Tancredo also sponsored a 2005 press conference organized to protest Denver’s “Sanctuary” policies of not requiring proof of citizenship to receive social services. He argued that illegal immigrants were likely to be cop killers and claimed that the fight to drive undocumented aliens out of the city was a fight for the public safety of innocent families and children.

Representative Tancredo has been joined in his hostility to El Centro by a rising anti-immigration movement represented by such local groups as the Colorado Minutemen and Sovereignty Now, who have staged protests in front of El Centro’s doors and even shown up at El Centro fundraisers to berate supporters. Websites of these groups feature threatening video clips of workers entering and leaving El Centro and include commentary that these “illegal immigrants” are dangerous thugs who travel “terrorist alley” to become “the terrorist next door,” and who lived in trash-strewn trailer parks and were responsible for rampant murder, prostitution, drug trade, disease and environmental degradation.

Some of the anxieties of such anti-immigrant groups are understandable. Across the nation, average Americans have watched uneasily as America has joined the new global economy and found many of its well-paying manufacturing jobs outsourced to the Mexican Maquiladoras, China, and the Marianas, even while that same global corporate process was busy importing cheap, immigrant labor into America to pick the crops, build the houses, and work in America’s new service economy at wages far below what Americans have become accustomed to. The fury of the global race to the bottom has been unleashed in heartland America, and anxious American workers look at the new Latino labor force among them, wonder at the new languages and cultures emerging in their cities, and try to figure exactly how their nation had come to this place. In their concern over these global processes, many Americans are lining up behind simple solutions of “arrest the illegals, expand the prisons, build a wall, arrest the immigrant sympathizers and declare fortress America.”

But there are other Americans who see a better path to the future. Denver and America are at a crossroads, pondering two paths to the future. As the global economy brings thousands of new workers to Denver in search of livelihood, Denver can respond with hostility and police arrests, driving this workforce into the shadows where they will remain a marginalized and exploited labor force. Or, Denver can follow El Centro’s pragmatic path of recognizing that immigrant workers are not to blame for new global realities, and that the best way to build a better Denver is to make sure these workers find places to protect their human rights and the rights of their families. Denver can respond to this new workforce with respect and help, and build a better Denver.

Community supporters standing with El Centro

“El Centro provides much needed employment assistance for people who often encounter many barriers to work.”

— Roxane White, Director of Denver Dept of Human Services
“El Centro has made a tremendous contribution to the quality of life for workers and their families by helping to ensure that workers are safe, treated fairly, and compensated as promised.”

— David Miller, President of The Denver Foundation

rights, to learn important skills like English and computers, and to find pathways to offer their culture and their work as contributions to the Denver community.

By 2005, the national debate over these two futures had reached a fever pitch. When the U.S. House of Representatives in Washington passed H.R. 4437 the “Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005,” it was becoming clear that offering outreach and support to impoverished immigrant workers might soon become more challenging in the United States. Among the recommendations of the bill was criminalizing assistance to undocumented individuals in the United States, which would have subjected El Centro’s staff to hefty fines and possible jail sentences. It was clear that anti-immigrant attitudes in the United States were hardening.

“We do not choose our times, but we choose how to respond to them,” claimed one speaker at an El Centro breakfast fundraiser around this time. “The politics of the moment give all of us here in this room a chance to stand up together in support of El Centro and defend what kind of city we want Denver to become.”

And that’s just what supporters did. When a dozen anti-immigrant Minutemen showed up early one morning to picket El Centro and demand its closure, more than 200 El Centro supporters also turned out, crowding the El Centro parking lot with colorful songs and speeches in support of El Centro and demonstrating that the Denver community stood with, not against, impoverished immigrant workers seeking only to survive.

And when the events of 2005 turned into the historic pro-immigrant rallies of 2006, El Centro was also there. El Centro’s staff and workers helped organize (and spoke at) the massive Denver rallies, when upwards of 100,000 people turned out in opposition to

From the Archives!

The Inaugural issue of “LABOR” went out to the Denver community in June of 2003. LABOR is the newsletter of El Centro Humanitario, and was introduced in its first issue as follows:

“It is with much pride and excitement that we publish the first issue of “Labor,” the first newsletter by and for nuestro barrio. This monthly paper will feature stories of interest to all immigrant day laborers in the Denver metro area. We will publish news and stories about these workers and immigrants in general.”

Centro Marches at Cesar Chavez Rally!! On March 31st, several Centro workers, staff, and volunteers marched in honor of Denver’s Cesar Chavez holiday, recognizing one of the greatest civil rights leaders of the last century. The March went well, as Centro staff met with local politicians and mayoral candidates.

Centro Workers Help Denver Dig Out!! During the snowstorms in March, over 30 workers helped Denver cope with the intense blizzard.

Centro Volunteers go to Washington!! Last fall, five representatives from El Centro went to Washington D.C. to participate in the second annual National Day Labor Organizing Conference. In Washington, Centro workers met with workers from cities all across the United States. Workers also visited with national politicians to try to promote legislation to improve the lives of workers and immigrants throughout the country. (Unfortunately, when we got to Congressman Tancredo’s office, he slipped out the back door to avoid us!!)

NEWS IN BRIEF FROM EL CENTRO’S INAUGURAL 2003 NEWSLETTER

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the growing anti-immigrant climate in America—probably the largest immigration/Latino rallies in Denver’s history.

This was a crowd that stood up for the men and women on the corner and the human rights that El Centro and other immigrant advocates represented. Across the nation similar rallies swept through America’s cities, and the harsh “Sensennbrenner” bill went down to defeat.

**EL CENTRO’S FUTURE**

The Denver rallies and defeat of the Sensennbrenner bill marked a great success for those working with immigrants, but troubling challenges for El Centro remain. Shortly after the historic events of 2005 and 2006, El Centro began to struggle with several funders, who were increasingly hesitant to support an agency in such a climate of political uncertainty. As the immigration issue became more politicized, lines in the sand were being drawn, and local residents, funders and political officials had to choose whether they supported El Centro’s work or opposed it.

Though it has been a challenge, thus far the community has responded with support. The City of Denver continues to support El Centro’s work with substantial grants, many national and local foundations have stood with El Centro during these troubled times, and the circle of individual donors continues to grow. Denver has seen the harsh future offered by those advocating the complete closure of outreach centers like El Centro, and has responded with a more generous and open-hearted approach.

In its short history El Centro has seen its fair share of controversies and obstacles, but it has also achieved extraordinary accomplishments and offered Denver an invaluable service to the community. From daily outreach from a table on the corner to a well-organized suite of programs offered in a refurbished, twenty-first century building, El Centro has managed to maintain its vision of justice and equality. The years ahead are sure to present El Centro with new challenges, but the commitment to day laborers and the rights they have as human beings will stay the same.

“Los pueblos, unidos, jamas sera vencidos!”
(“The people, united, will never be defeated!”)

— Popular Slogan of Immigrant Supporters

A small gathering of hostile protestors show up to picket El Centro

But a much larger crowd of supporters turn out to stand with El Centro
I am here today to ask of ourselves that we recognize that immigrant workers come to America to work and to better the lives of their families back home. We must acknowledge that many work in unsafe working conditions and are 80% more likely to die or be injured at work. We should admire them for cleaning our buildings, building our homes, preparing our food, producing our oil, working our mines, cleaning our hotels, mowing our lawns, digging our ditches, and yes, even fighting our wars. And for those of us who attend religious worship this past weekend, we should conduct a full moral gut check as we watch immigrant workers wither in our deserts, drown in our rivers, and die on our highways.

If we are honest with ourselves, we should recognize that in many ways, immigrant workers embody basic American values of hard work, sacrifice and love of family. I believe a great people live by their moral and ethical principles every day. I believe that a great nation earns respect when it shows compassion and decency. And I believe that this U.S. is great because it has been a nation of immigrants and will be greater because of future immigrants.”
I was in North Carolina working in the field for more than twelve hours per day for three months, but my employer did not pay a single penny after all my hard work. Because I stayed at the employer’s house, I thought that he would pay later. But, he kept delaying the payment that I asked for. When I finally confronted him one night to ask for the payment that I deserved, he threatened to call the INS. I left there that night, feeling very hurt. I kept thinking about my six year old twin daughters and my wife who needed the money so badly.

When I arrived in Denver, I learned about The Humanitarian Center for Workers. I never thought that there would be a place where people treated us so warmly. El Centro’s staff and volunteers help us to find work, help people learn the rights that we have, and look after us from the harshness of society. Because I always had a feeling that most people in this country despised us, I was surprised to find El Centro so friendly towards people like myself.

At The Humanitarian Center, things are fair and equal for all of those whom have the desire to do things in the correct way, without any preferences for anyone; not for their nationality, not for their physical appearance and not for their customs. Every morning we come in to sign a list; they then give us an identification number as we come in. This number is then entered in a basin where it is then raffled to see who is next to work. It is something very similar to the situation on the corner, but with much more responsibility and serenity. Here at the Center the mission is to have the people doing something productive and educational; meanwhile we wait for work at the center.

There are a lot of projects that are productive and beneficial to all of the people who participate at the Center, but I am concerned that the Center does not have enough funding to continue its operation. It appears that a very small number of people are aware of the Center and support it, because it is very new to Denver. However, we all depend upon El Centro. Here are some things that workers have volunteered to do: distributing flyers about our center house-by-house in different areas of the city; sending faxes to different companies to promote more work; and cleaning and repairing the Center to give it a better look and to demonstrate that things here at the center are serious and we are hard workers.

I hope that people are more aware of our center and understand immigrants who also give so much to this country. We come to this country to give our families better lives. But we want to improve our lives in the right way—by working hard and not receiving anything as a pity gift. I hope to tell good things about America when I return to my family in the near future. I would like to tell my family and my kids that most Americans are very warm hearted and kind, despite the fact that I had some horrible experiences with employers. Most of all, I would like to tell them much about my Centro Humanitario.

A Worker’s Voice: “My Centro Humanitario”

Jose Martinez
DANGEROUS STREET-CORNER

For day laborers, securing work on the street-corner can be chaotic and dangerous. Scrambling into the back of a pickup truck that has stopped in traffic to pick up a few workers has its pitfalls: workers do not know the employer, don’t know where they will go, and are vulnerable to theft of their wages when predatory employers refuse to pay a fair wage or any wage at all. Traffic incidents and injuries are common on the corner, as are police citations for trespassing or impeding traffic. Neighboring residents and businesses are often hostile to the chaotic street scene. Furthermore, working in these conditions offers few opportunities for advancement through learning new skills, or securing more permanent employment.

As the Day Laborer Research Institute has documented, “negotiation of wages is impossible in a situation where day laborers are forced to run at employers’ cars and trucks and to employers who almost always choose the first to get there or the first to get in. Some employers consciously use this method to choose workers— one employer proudly reported ‘I want to see who runs fastest to see who’s hungriest.’ And day laborers are unable to negotiate fair wages as employers quickly turn to a day laborer willing to go for less.”

BUILDING A POSITIVE ALTERNATIVE

El Centro’s employment program offers a positive alternative to this street labor market. El Centro workers themselves, through a series of “workers’ committee” meetings, designed an efficient and fair system for recruiting employers, distributing work, and securing a fair wage. “We were trying to make sure our work is done with dignity,” remembers one of the founders of the employment program, “and not just fight like animals.”

Today the employment program has a time-tested set of procedures. All workers at El Centro must pass through an orientation so as to better understand the El Centro system. The orientation includes an introduction to fundamental human rights of all workers, and explanation of the rules and expectations of workers.

Workers are expected to show up each day ready for work; if any have been drinking or are disruptive, they are not allowed to use the program that day.

EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM

• Survey reveals 90% of those finding work on the corner have experienced non-payment of wages.
• 100% of workers receiving work through El Centro have received promised wages.
• Minimum wage of El Centro laborers is $10 an hour; street-corner laborers commonly earn much less.
• 80–100 workers sign up for work at El Centro daily; 1500 unique individuals every year.
• 35% of registered workers find work at least once a week at El Centro.

A worker completes a remodeling project on the street-corner.
“There are times when the jobs are hard, and my back aches, and I miss my home so much. But no matter how hard, I try to do the job well and without complaint. In that way, no discredit can come upon us here at El Centro.”
— Francisco, El Centro Worker

Upon arriving at El Centro, workers receive a lottery ticket, since all work for the day will be distributed by random lottery, unless the employer asks for a specific skill such as brick laying or laying carpet.

Minimum wage started at $8.00 an hour, and has now risen to $10.00 an hour, which workers feel is a fair wage for the kind of hard (and often skilled) work they are commonly asked to do. All the wages go directly to the worker.

The employer's name and address of the worksite is collected in case of any wage troubles later on, and the employer can count on El Centro staff to help resolve problems the employer has with the workers.

On a regular basis, workers are expected to put in a shift distributing flyers throughout the community, advertising the availability of day laborers at the El Centro site.

While workers are waiting for work, they can participate in a range of workshops such as English, computer, or construction classes.

If an employer does not pay promised wages, workers commit to supporting each other in collective actions such as picketing the employer's house or worksite, or supporting each other in court actions.

The El Centro employment program turns the chaotic and undignified street-corner labor market into a regularized process in which workers can stand together for jobs in fair and dignified conditions, and can explore opportunities for work advancement.

Over the years, more employers are using the center, and fewer continue to hire workers off the corner. Workers have learned that anyone who receives jobs through El Centro receives their promised wages, while street-corner workers often receive lower wages, or sometimes no wages at all. With each passing year, more workers show up to El Centro, and an increasing number of them are receiving jobs. Employers are finding a better prepared workforce, in more orderly conditions. Workers are receiving more fair and secure wages. Neighborhood residents, business and the police are finding far fewer problems with the street-corner labor market. The El Centro model is working.

Ramon's Story

“I knew about this country because of magazines my brothers used to bring me. The story of the Lone Ranger. So I fell in love with this country when I was a kid. I never thought it would have tall buildings. I thought it was all ranches and cowboys. I came for a job. I used to be very lonely here, very sad. Its like people go by and they don't see you. So I used to go home, but I always come back. Because I always wanted to have a job.”

Percent of workers hired

<table>
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<th>Year</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
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<tr>
<td>7%</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
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Growth of employers

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2003</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100%</td>
<td>608%</td>
<td>1136%</td>
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We ended up being homeless about a year ago, coming down from Oregon. We lived out of a motel, ended up homeless, and ended up staying at shelters like Samaritan House. We went from Samaritan House to hotel vouchers. Then we learned about El Centro and we came down here a few weeks ago. We went through the orientation and have been here pretty much every day since then.

We go out for work pretty much every day. I usually go out for different jobs; I have a lot of repeats from two people who call and tell me they will come down again and get me. So a lot of the guys here always think I’m really lucky. They’re like, “Ever since you came here, you always go out.” And that’s probably true, I lucked out on that. And that’s good because we have our little baby, Nicholas, and he’s always taken care of.

Being here at El Centro, we’re getting away from our homeless situation. We’ve got money saved up in our savings and checking account. We don’t spend as much money because we have food, have a place to sleep, don’t have to worry about where we are laying our heads, so the people here have really helped out a lot.
My name is Manuel Martinez. I was honored to be elected as the first President of the El Centro Workers’ Committee.

I come to Denver every year from Chihuahua, Mexico. I have been doing this for several years now, ever since I lost my job as a security guard due to the hard times in Mexico. After losing my job, I could only find enough work in Chihuahua to earn maybe $400 a month. This was not enough to support myself and my mother, who lives with me and depends on my work. I had to find something better, and when some friends mentioned that there was work up in Denver, right off the street-corner, I decided to come.

Even though I often live in the shelters or other hard locations while here in Denver, I try hard to remain clean every day so that the employers know I can be trusted. I have a college degree in Engineering, and I know how to hang drywall and do electrical wiring, so I can find a lot of work in Denver. I come every summer, and work as hard as I can and save the money so that I can take it back to my mother and fiancé in Mexico. I am here with a work permit as a seasonal worker, which helps me to find the good jobs that can help my family survive. Still, it’s hard to know where to go to find the work. I used to be on the corner waiting on employers that came to the corner looking for us. In those times, many employers did not pay us. The payment wasn’t on time, and I worried about whether they would pay me or not. The work was dangerous and I was not secure. You do not even know where you are going to work, or what you are going to do sometimes.

I came to El Centro Humanitario to see what kinds of opportunity that El Centro offered. I found this place safer to talk to employers and to get jobs. You are secure when you leave the center because you know that you are going to get paid and that the employer is a good employer. I know that if I do not get paid, the legal clinic will help me get paid. Moreover, at the center, I try to improve my learning such as English, computers and different cultural learning to get a better opportunity to get work. I come to El Centro from 6:00 a.m. every morning to find employers.

Thanks to El Centro, I found a way to earn money every day and send it to my family in Mexico, so that they can survive like me, in this big city. For this reason, El Centro is a safer place for every worker and for the community. El Centro gives us the opportunity to improve our lives. I keep trying to save money so that I can build a small house for myself, my mother, and my fiancé in Chihuahua. Also, I would like to start a brick making company in my home city, if I can work enough and save money. One day, I will go back to college and earn my Masters degree. In the meantime, I am thankful to Denver and to El Centro for welcoming me as a worker in this city.
In late 2005, Denver became the third city in the nation to adopt an innovative “Wage Theft” ordinance to dissuade predatory employers from exploiting vulnerable workers. This ordinance resulted partly from the groundbreaking work of El Centro Humanitario staff and workers who worked to document the substantial numbers of day laborers who had experienced non-payment of wages, and to research solutions adopted in other cities. El Centro joined a team of collaborators in drafting and lobbying for this ordinance, including the Front Range Economic Strategy Center, Denver University Law School, The Color of Justice, SEIU, and the Colorado Immigrant Rights Coalition. El Centro is proud to be part of a team that, by making it harder to exploit the most vulnerable workers in our community, has improved the status of all workers in Denver.

In the opposite column, read how the editors of the Denver Post expressed their support of the ordinance.

“Denver Councilman Doug Linkhart’s proposal to make stiffing day laborers on their wages a crime is a sound idea, and the full City Council should approve the ordinance when it comes up for a vote next week. Cheating workers out of wages exceeding $500 is a Class 4 felony under state law and a Class 2 or 3 misdemeanor, depending on the total, for amounts less than that. But violations of state law have to be prosecuted by the district attorney, which is busy enough with serious crime. Linkhart says a city ordinance would allow police to file complaints against deadbeat employers who could then be prosecuted in County Court by the city attorney’s office.

“Day laborers are especially vulnerable, not only because they are usually at the low end of the wage scale, but also because they frequently are transient, homeless or immigrants unfamiliar with either the English language or the legal system or both. Labor advocates have tried with mixed success to help workers collect the wages due them. El Centro Humanitario para Los Trabajadores (the Humanitarian Center for Workers) told The Post it’s been swamped with complaints of wage thefts in recent years. Although the non-profit center has managed to collect $30,000 in back wages for workers since 2002, about 50 day laborers believe they are still owed about $60,000 in wages.

“If Denver passes the ordinance, it would become the third city after Austin, Texas, and Kansas City to enact a wage-theft law. Such laws have proved an effective inducement for employers to pay up, according to Linkhart. In the two years that Austin’s law has been on the books, only 13 criminal cases actually have been filed, he said, because about 80 percent of the cases were resolved without going to court. “All they have to do is send a threatening letter saying there’s a law you need to abide by, and most employers will cooperate,” Linkhart said. … Linkhart’s proposal is a reasonable tool for dealing with abuse of the city’s low-wage laborers. Stealing another person’s sweat is like stealing somebody’s wallet. This law would give cheated workers their day in county court”

— From the Editors,
Denver Post, November 25, 2005.
EVERY HUMAN BEING HAS LABOR RIGHTS

Labor rights in the United States are protected by law. Whether a person is working a steady job with regular hours or working on a daily basis, once a worker has performed work for a promised wage, he or she has a right to that wage—whether the worker has legal documents or not. One challenge facing workers at El Centro is knowing and enforcing their rights as laborers. The El Centro legal program provides day laborers the legal assistance they need in the Denver area.

Composed of University of Denver law students, under the guidance of a law school faculty member, the legal program provides workers with legal assistance onsite at El Centro. A free service, the legal program helps to mediate legal disputes, provides advice to workers, and educates workers about their labor rights and the power of collective action.

FIGHTING WAGE THEFT

Wage theft is a significant problem for day laborers. Often times employers hire workers for a day or more of work, and then refuse to pay them, or pay them less than the agreed upon wage. Unscrupulous employers often believe that the legal status and homeless condition of many of these immigrant day laborers will make them unable to stand up for their labor rights.

Surveys of street-corner workers in Denver show that over 90% of the workers have experienced non-payment of wages. Sometimes workers are enticed to work for weeks, and then the employer simply refuses to pay wages adding up to hundreds or even thousands of dollars.

This kind of wage theft prompted El Centro to establish the legal defense program. Although the need for a legal clinic was evident, El Centro did not have any lawyers to back it up in its first days, so the only recourse for unpaid wages during these early days was picketing the employer’s house or place of business and informing the community about the questionable character of this particular employer. In several cases, workers who received work off the corner, but who were not paid, came to El Centro with complaints that led to pickets—which were sometimes successful in shaming the employer into paying and other times not. It was only a matter of time until someone hired from El Centro itself didn’t get paid for their labor.

LEGAL PROGRAM

Legal Clinic Statistics

- Nearly $50,000 in unpaid wages collected in first four years of operation.
- $64,000 in unpaid wages collected in 2006.
- Helped draft Denver’s 2005 wage-theft ordinance: the third in the nation.
- Collaborates to offer “Know Your Rights” workshops to workers.
- Helping to protect Aurora, CO day laborers from city efforts to restrict their free speech and assembly rights.

Law Clinic volunteer advises an El Centro worker
“El Centro serves as a valued partner in protecting the human rights of all our citizens.”
— Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper

One of the first employers who did not pay El Centro laborers was a local remodeling company. This incident initiated the ongoing relationship between El Centro and the DU law school. A DU law student who was volunteering at El Centro at the time (Chris Newman) worked with DU law school faculty to represent the worker in court against the remodeling company, and was able to win El Centro's first wage claim case. DU law students, under the supervision of clinical faculty, now constitute El Centro's pro bono legal program.

Since the legal clinic has opened, every person who has found a job through El Centro has received his or her wages, in part because of the assistance provided by the legal program. In its first four years of operation, the legal program has successfully recovered nearly $50,000 in unpaid wages, through mediation, and sometimes through legal action.

In addition to working on individual cases, the legal clinic is organizing self-advocacy training sessions, where workers learn how to defend their own legal rights even without legal assistance, and where workers come together to strategize collective action amongst themselves to improve and defend their legal rights.

Awards and Commendations

The legal program has won an award from the American Bar Association as one of the nation’s top community legal programs. It has also garnered praise from Denver’s municipal government. Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper remarked at El Centro Humanitario 3rd Anniversary Celebration that “El Centro’s legal employment and educational programs have helped countless individuals in acquiring the skills necessary to be productive members of our community. As Denver’s only non-profit dedicated to the protection of immigrant day laborers, El Centro’s serves as a valued partner in protecting the human rights of all our citizens. I commend you on your third anniversary and wish you all continued success.”

Predatory Employer!

In 2004, a small Denver remodeling company became famous among day laborers for picking up workers for weeks of work, and then never paying them, alleging that their work was sub-par. The employer forced workers to sign a contract stating “I agree to complete this construction job...all pay will be provided only upon completion of job and only if inspection by the company owner determines that the job has been done in quality fashion.”

The company owner would collect the contracts, work the employees several weeks, and then refuse pay, saying the work was of poor quality. This illegal scam led the legal clinic to partner with workers to mount a series of public protests at the business location, and to bring legal action in court.

The owner of the company was found guilty, and ordered to deliver the workers several thousand dollars in back pay. The owner and his business soon disappeared altogether, presumably to find less organized workforces to exploit. Denver’s work climate is better because of it.

Protesting a predatory employer
Can Cities Silence Day Laborers?

A Reflection on Free Speech on Local Street Corners

“There is no freedom of speech or assembly at that location.” So claimed the Aurora Assistant City Attorney when arguing that it was illegal for day laborers to speak up and ask for work in certain areas of Aurora (Denver Post, 6/6/07).

Do zoning codes trump free speech rights?

In the summer of 2007, the city of Aurora sent eight police officers to instruct a store owner on Colfax and Dayton that she was violating zoning codes by allowing day laborers to stand on her property and solicit employment. For years, impoverished workers have congregated informally and peacefully on this parking lot, hoping to speak to passersby with offers of daily labor. Many Aurora officials see this gathering as an eyesore to be run off the streets. Last year, Aurora drafted an ordinance illegalizing solicitations of employment on street corners, but the effort failed as an unconstitutional restriction of workers’ right to speak in public.

This time, Aurora is using a refined tactic to drive day laborers off the streets. The City Attorney now argues, at the behest of City Council, that the store owner allowing day laborers to stand on her parking lot is operating an “employment agency” that violates a zoning code requiring at least 1,500 feet between employment agencies (a formal day labor business operates nearby).

This argument is disingenuous; the city’s real intent is to eliminate the public display of poverty, not to protect the local zoning code. Examination of the code reveals that the day labor corner, where private individuals gather informally to discuss their need for work one-on-one with passersby, is not a structured “employment agency,” which is clearly defined by the zoning code to require an indoor facility, bathrooms and the collection of fees. None of these conditions apply on this street corner where workers gather informally, with no facility and where no one pays any kind of fees. Let’s be honest: individual day laborers seeking casual work on street corners are not “operating a business” by any common-sense definition of the term.

Aurora’s claim is that when people walk on public sidewalks, or gather on private lots, they have no right to speak, if what they have to say concerns their need for a job. If the laborers gathered on the same lot to talk politics, or swap jokes, there would be no law broken—but the minute workers publicly express their poverty and need for work, Aurora claims they are operating a business and violating the law.

Aurora’s actions are an arbitrary and capricious campaign to single out a specific kind of speech, uttered by vulnerable and disliked persons, and declare it illegal. Such efforts cannot pass constitutional muster. Already the Supreme Court has overturned similar ordinances against loitering and street-corner work solicitation. In the landmark 1972 Papachristou case, the Court argued that such laws make it illegal for poor people to speak about their poverty and “make criminal activities which by modern standards are normally innocent” (e.g., activities like talking on a sidewalk). The court argued that such a law “furnishes a convenient tool for harsh and discriminatory enforcement by local prosecuting officials, against particular groups deemed to merit their displeasure…It results in a regime in which the poor and the unpopular are permitted to stand on a public sidewalk . . . only at the whim of any police officer.”

The Supreme Court repudiated such rules, arguing that free speech rights apply to minorities as well as majorities, to the poor as well as the rich, and even when the speech of the poor offends the aesthetics of local officials. All our officials should respect these constitutional values and recognize that day laborers have the right to speak to us from street corners, without fear of police harassment.

—Dr. Tony Robinson
Associate Professor, CU-Denver/HSC

—Minsun Ji
Executive Director, El Centro Humanitario
A Worker’s Story: “For my daughter’s sake…”

Rosie

Before I came here, we used to be at home wondering what we were going to eat, where we were going to go, how to get a job. We have plenty of places to go for work; there are plenty of temporary employment places, but they charge too much, and the pay is too low.

At El Centro we get reasonable pay. It’s a non-profit organization, so that helps us a lot, because it’s an employer to employee relationship, and we don’t have to deal with paying for the service. El Centro depends on donations—we don’t know how they get money or don’t get money, but they always help us.

They’re here like our counselors too, they’re always here for us. It’s more than a friend: we can count on the staff here for whatever we need. I need some clothes, they tell me where to go. I need a job, all I have to do is raffle a ticket. They call my number, I’m out. And I usually go out. I’m lucky to go out. And I’m not the only one.

There’s so many people here who are so grateful. They’re homeless, and they need work. And they give us work here, and it’s great. Sometimes we get four hours, sometimes eight. And if we’re feeling sick, there’s medical help. There’s a man who comes in to El Centro and talks to us, and directs us to a hospital or a clinic and takes care of that—the financials, the health needs, and all of that. That helps us a lot.

Without El Centro, we were nobody. We just stayed at home. The ones who had an apartment stayed home, and the ones that didn’t, they would just run the streets and get into trouble. Breaking into cars and doing wrong. But with El Centro, we can stay here from 6 to 1. There’s a lot of us who go out daily, so that lets us go to work and stay out of trouble. We can stand on the corner and hope they come for us, but there’s no guarantee they will pay us like here.

We know that this is our meal ticket. We come here and as long as we have a positive attitude and behave and keep the place clean, we have a home.

Also, I have a daughter. She’s 24, and the doctors have found some brain cancer…some tumors on her brain. In that way the center has helped me a lot. Helping me get work, get medicine, money, traveling money to see my daughter.

I’m very blessed to have the center. Without El Centro I couldn’t do nothing. She’s been getting better. It’s wonderful; better than staying at home and just worrying and stressing out. My daughter is recovering real good—slowly, but she’s coming through. I don’t know what I would do without the Center, out in the streets, without money. Can you imagine? So I’m blessed to have the center for my daughter’s sake.
**Women’s Program**

- Self-sufficient Co-op, with their own bank account.
- Supported by Denver University Graduate School of International Studies, in early years.
- About 70 women graduate from the program a year.
- Provides resume and other job training.
- Partners with City of Denver Workforce Development Office.
- Legal rights and business training.
- Offers a cleaning co-op and catering business.

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**El Centro’s Women Workers**

Juanita comes to El Centro desperate for work to support her three small children. She is applying for asylum in America after fleeing her abusive Honduran husband, and while in legal limbo finds it hard to land regular work that will feed, shelter and clothe her children. She can not return to her own country, for fear of her life; she can not work and support her children in America, for fear of the law.

Tonya is from Denver, and has spent a life in communities filled with the drug trade, prostitution, few hopes and low expectations. She has struggled with drugs and petty theft in her youth, and paid for it with a stint in jail. She is clean and sober now, and desperate to hold onto some kind of work so she can afford to keep her tiny apartment for herself and her young boy in North Park Hill. But who will hire a poorly educated, black, single-mother with a criminal background?

Flore is a wizened matriarch who has seen it all. A wondrous cook with colorful stories and a broad smile, Flore is the first to show up at a house party to help the host prepare the meal and set out the wares, and the last to leave as she helps clean the dishes and tidy up the house. Forced by grinding poverty to flee Mexico, hoping to afford daily food and a chance at dignity America, Flore is an asset to any community with her helpful spirit, rich food and wonderful tales.

These are the kinds of women who come to El Centro and make up its Women’s Project.

The need to find work is not gender specific. Many women from all over the world must leave their family and friends to find work in the United States. Some women are forced to flee their homes for work on the streets due to domestic violence. The physical demands of most day labor put women at a disadvantage, and many women also have small children to care for, making work doubly difficult. In a daily existence that is filled with uncertainty, migrant women must be resourceful when it comes to finding daily work in order to survive and feed their families. El Centro’s women’s program gives impoverished women the organization and the resources they need to find work, improve their lives, and empower themselves.

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**A Welcome Home**

El Centro’s “Women’s Program” was established in February of 2004, as increasing numbers of low-income women
began showing up at El Centro in search of daily work and other services to help them survive. Many of these women were recent immigrants, without language or networking skills to find good jobs. Many were victims of domestic violence and were looking for a community to help them protect and rebuild their lives. Others were leading lonely lives of impoverished desperation, seeking someone who would simply hear their voice and recognize their worth.

At El Centro they found a place where they could discover each other, share their stories and insights, and build a program to help each other improve their lives.

El Centro’s women’s program helps women find work and restore their sense of dignity and community. Designed to develop women’s leadership skills, increase self-esteem through organizing, and create valuable human networks, El Centro’s women’s program is rapidly developing and becoming more important within the organization. El Centro Director Minsun Ji notes that “We are growing really fast, especially the women’s program.”

The El Centro women’s project helps women through individual services such as job placement and various educational programs, but it is also a peer-support empowerment project that helps women come together in collaborative ventures to build the networks to support and empower each other.

**WOMEN’S PROJECT PROGRAMS**

The women’s program provides valuable life-skills and job training programs that Minsun Ji says are organized to help “Develop self-sufficiency, and provide lower wage women with job and training to move up. This is part of a job creation and networking opportunity.”

Some of the various educational services provided to workers in the women’s project include:

- To help El Centro’s women land better jobs with better wage prospects, El Centro’s women’s program works with the City of Denver’s Workforce Development Office to provide resume and job-interview training to help women with the job application process.
- Cultural education workshops educate the women on the work culture of the United States, helping them understand the sometimes subtle differences between work in their country of origin and in America.
“Without the Women’s Project, I would be empty, with no opportunities to learn and grow.”

— Maria S.

- The women’s education program provides a financial education program that helps low-income women learn to manage banking accounts.

- Volunteers in the women’s program help the female workers learn English. Classes are offered at several different levels and provide the women the linguistic skills they need to succeed in the workplace.

About seventy women graduate every year from the women’s educational program. Upon finishing, participants are given a certificate of completion that documents their involvement in the training and educational programs of El Centro.

A WOMEN’S COOPERATIVE

In addition to enhancing the individual skills of women in the program, El Centro’s women project is an effort to help women organize collective projects to enhance their self-sufficiency and learn important new business skills. For example, El Centro’s women’s program is completely self-organized and operated. Women in the program elect their own officers, design and create their own programs, and determine the behavioral expectations of its members. They even control their own program budget, which is made up of a few small grants—but mostly is earned and contributed by the women themselves.

Here’s how it works. Women’s project participants meet regularly to devise and manage a variety of cooperative micro-enterprise programs to earn income for the participants. Cooperative business projects of the El Centro women include a local catering company providing delicious home-made tamales and other Mexican treats to a variety of community events, and an efficient and professional house cleaning crew called “The Queens of Clean.” All the enterprises have been successful at placing women for work and earning income. When income comes in, 85% of the proceeds are distributed to the women, while 15% is allocated back to the program to help sustain it.

Sometimes a woman will receive an individual work placement through El Centro, perhaps helping to paint a house, provide temporary office help, or provide janitorial services. Often this woman will have small children to care for while she works. The Women’s Project comes through again, as the women of the project join together to cooperatively take care of the children of any women fortunate enough to receive work for the day.

Leadership development workshops and peer-support “story-telling” circles are also important to the women’s project. Many women in the program are victims of domestic violence, and the small peer-support groups that constitute the program create a sense of family that is badly needed in a daily routine filled with so many challenges. Leadership and legal rights workshops also help women discover their own power and potential, helping them on a path to a better future.

Future plans for the women’s program include designing a marketing plan and brochure in order to expand their growing catering business, and developing a daycare center for women in the program. “Our numbers are small, but we’re focusing on marketing to get our name out there and to attract more customers for catering events,” says Minsun.

The El Centro Women’s Project gathers in pride.
I left Mexico almost nine years ago. I left against my will. My husband and I had a restaurant in Troncones, Mexico, and business wasn’t going well. My husband decided to come to the United States for two things: he wanted to try his luck here, and he wanted to distance me from my family.

We sold our business, our furniture: we got rid of everything in order to have enough money to pay for our crossing into the U.S. The coyote charged us $4,500 to help all of us cross the border. The journey from Mexico to enter the U.S. took a week. We crossed on foot through a dark, wet tunnel and a cargo truck carrying corn took us to Phoenix. Crossing the border was very difficult – the exhaustion, the length of the trip, the cold – and on the way one of our coyotes assaulted us in plain sight.

My husband found work in a meat shop, and I began to work cleaning offices. My sons began to go to school and we began our life in Denver. I did not know in Mexico, my husband was doing drugs; when I began to work here, he began to take what I earned from me to have money for his vice, cocaine. It made him an irresponsible father and husband, an abuser and violent. I suffered in that marriage for 21 years; he brought me to the U.S. to isolate me from my family that defended and protected me. I found myself alone and without support or help.

I tried to leave my husband in a good way, negotiating things, but he became violent. I was desperate, to the point of wanting to take my own life. The fact of being a mother kept me going, my sons, gave the strength to keep going. My husband threatened to kill me, and that is when I left him. I sought help in a women’s crisis center and went from shelter to shelter. In one of the shelters they helped me with the divorce and finally I did it. I have a restraining order against my husband, I have custody of my sons, although at present I can’t be with them because I don’t have economic resources to support myself and them.

A friend who attends that women’s group at El Centro Humanitario told me about their project for women. The project has helped me to feel more stable emotionally. I have learned how to work outside my house, how to go out and look for a job. Without the Women’s Project, I’d be empty, with no opportunities to learn and grow.

If I had the choice, I would not have left Mexico. But I do not regret coming to the U.S. because here is where I became free from my husband and the life I had with him. I am happy now, free.
A Worker’s Story: “I’ve Learned to Love Myself”

Anna

I was a very happy girl in my childhood; everything was a paradise with my parents. Then, when I was 17 my parents divorced and my mother remarried. That brought problems for me because she did not want anyone to damage her new relationship and she kicked me out of the house. One day my aunt who lived in Los Angeles came to Mexico and said to me “Do you want to come with me?” I said yes.

I left Mexico to come to the U.S. to live; it was a dream I had. But, the experience of crossing the border was a nightmare because of all the dangers and risks that I went through. For example, the coyote who helped me cross the border wanted to take advantage of me. The curious thing is that when I left Mexico I wasn’t afraid; I came with a lot of assurance that everything would turn out well. But when the coyote began to harass me, then I became afraid, since this was a different situation.

The arrangement with my aunt was that she would help me get into the U.S. and I would work for her, taking care of her children. But after I arrived and began to work I realized, with time, that she was cheating me, paying me $60 a week.

I began to work in a Mexican restaurant, where I did cleaning and served food. That was where I met the father of my sons. We went out for a month and then he said he wanted to marry me. I was not happy in my marriage. After one year he became a violent man. From then on my life became darkness. I tried to work and my husband wouldn’t let me; I felt trapped. If I did manage to work, what I earned my husband took and kept; he kept all the money. We were together for ten years and with him I had my two sons.

After ten years I decided I’d had enough abuse and suffering with my husband. I decided my two sons deserved a better life and I did too. I stayed with a friend and went to a shelter for abused women. At the shelter they helped me to solicit for a permanent home and improve my legal status, to feel sure of myself, to be strong and move forward.

I found out about El Centro Humanitario’s women’s project through a flyer. The project provides education, support, and space so that women like me can move forward, can believe that a future is possible. I had no idea there was a place for Latina women where I could go and learn about job skills.

All I have learned at El Centro has helped me to have more self-confidence. I have found faith to have a better future for myself here. I’ve learned how to love myself.
Ramon has been working through El Centro for the last ten weeks. He has been showing up at a job site every morning, five days a week, to help with the framing on a housing project. At the end of every week Ramon is given a check for the services he has provided, but Ramon does not have a bank account nor does he fully understand his banking options. So, every week he makes his way to the local check cashing business where he must surrender a percentage of his wages just so he can use them. Now, he must send money to his family in Mexico and he will have to pay another fee so that he can do this. By Saturday Ramon has spent money that he cannot afford to waste. He is a part of the most economically vulnerable group in the city, and he is among the most financially exploited because he doesn’t know any better options.

The Companion Card Solution

Established in 2007, the El Centro Financial Literacy Program was created to help people like Ramon become more financially educated and capable. Intended to give those that are unbankable, as well as those who have never banked before, asset-building options, the financial literacy program provides the knowledge and the means to be financially competent. The financial literacy program has three primary functions: to help workers safely store money, save it, and send it to their families at low cost.

For those who have limited or no banking options in traditional institutions, El Centro is building a companion card option through the Financial Literacy Program. More often than not, the workers at El Centro have never banked in the United States. They may come from countries with less consistent and reliable banking systems, and they are often wary of banks in the United States. Most workers at El Centro are not fully literate in English, let alone fully literate in finances, so they can be intimidated by the banking options that are available.

El Centro’s companion card will alleviate these financial impediments by allowing workers without a traditional bank account to access a pre-paid debit card, offered through El Centro itself, that serves many of the purposes of a traditional bank ATM card. Workers will use their own money to load value into the card at a pre-approved site (such as El Centro itself), and then the card will work just like a bank card.

First, the card will facilitate safe spending. Like a debit card it can be re-
charged with more money to spend safely and effectively. Without banking institutions, workers at El Centro must be responsible for the safe-keeping of their assets. This means carrying around all the money that they have, or keeping it at their homes. Both methods can result in bankruptcy when money is lost or stolen.

Second, the card will also facilitate saving, as workers can load and store as much value on the card as they wish. Cash is the most liquid asset we have, and studies have shown that it is spent more readily than any other form of currency. Having the means to put money away and separate it from everyday finances is important for anyone who is planning for a successful financial future.

Third, the card will facilitate transferring money. The companion card will allow workers to send remittances to their families at home and abroad. Workers will be able to use the companion card to transfer funds anywhere in the world, at low cost. Twenty-four hours a day, this can be done on the internet or by phone and the funds can accessed through debit or ATM machines. The transferring function eliminates the exorbitant fees that workers get charged by financially exploitative institutions.

As Jesus Orrantia, the director of the Financial Literacy Program explained: “These people are working for the least amount of money and they are having that money taken away from them by not having financial literacy.”

The Companion Card

- El Centro survey reveals that Denver day laborers spend $40 per month in financial transaction fees.
- Denver is among the top communities in the nation in terms of per capita transaction fees.
- “Companion Card” program begun at El Centro in collaboration with 9 other workers’ centers, as a national pilot program, funded mainly by Ford and Annie E. Casey Foundations.
- Program allows those without bank accounts to load cash onto personal card that acts as an traditional bank card.
- Card allows workers to store, save and transfer money at very low cost.

Financial Literacy Program

Expanding banking options is not the only function of the Financial Literacy Program. Thanks to the recent arrival of Jesus Orrantia at El Centro, educating workers about their financial options is now a part of the El Centro curriculum. A graduate of New Mexico State University, Jesus brought his expertise in economics, international business, and Spanish to El Centro and founded the Financial Literacy Program.

A resident of Las Cruces, New Mexico and the son of immigrants from Mexico, Jesus has spent a lifetime watching the financial struggles of newcomers to America. The Financial Literacy Program at El Centro is essentially about empowering people who do not have the knowledge nor the opportunity to achieve sustainable financial success. For those newcomers, according to Jesus, “the financial literacy program gives them the tools to be financially stable in the long run.”

“The financial literacy program gives them the tools to be financially stable in the long run.”

— Jesus Orrantia, Director of the Financial Literacy Program
Since opening, El Centro has operated in an old and deteriorated warehouse space that only barely met the needs of a large human services center. The warehouse had inadequate office space for staff, no private office for the legal clinic or for classrooms, inadequate ventilation, only a single run-down toilet for hundreds of workers, no running water fountain, many broken and boarded up windows, and a chipped and uneven old concrete floor.

But all that has now changed.

In 2005, El Centro’s landlord (Fred Pasternack) donated title of his large warehouse to El Centro Humanitario. With this donation, worth approximately $500,000, El Centro was in position to pursue additional donations to substantially renovate its aging structure, creating a permanent and pleasant space in downtown Denver for workers to gather. A capital campaign, featuring a fund-raiser breakfast with Mayor John Hickenlooper, brought many supporters together behind El Centro’s renovation goals.

With substantial support from the City and County of Denver, the Jay and Rose Phillips Family Foundation, the Gates Family Foundation, and many individual donors, El Centro has recently completed a $350,000 renovation of its site. New offices and bathrooms have been installed, better ventilation and water systems make the site more healthy, while new windows, new paint and a new level floor brighten up the space. El Centro’s warehouse is now a well-designed, bright and healthy space for workers, staff and the broader community to gather.

In 2007, El Centro celebrated its Fifth Anniversary and Grand Re-Opening after months of renovation. The keynote speaker was Dolores Huerta, the legendary civil rights activist who co-founded the United Farm Workers with Cesar Chavez and has continued her activism in the years since.

We have come a long ways as workers, staff and supporters of El Centro. From serving coffee on the street-corner while speaking together about the challenges facing day laborers, to renting a rundown warehouse site to begin the El Centro Project, to finally gathering in a fully renovated center, owned by El Centro itself: we have moved from the street-corner into the center, and we now celebrate the fact that the Humanitarian Center for Workers promises to be a long-time downtown Denver fixture.
All across America, from Haywood, California to Herndon, Virginia, day laborer centers like El Centro are being authorized by local jurisdictions as a pragmatic and humane response to the reality of impoverished and vulnerable workers in their communities. Still, there are many communities where city officials are working to tighten the noose on day laborers, and where police are increasingly instructed to issue tickets and otherwise harass impoverished day laborers asking for work in public. What will the future hold for El Centro Humanitario?

SUSTAINABILITY AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY

El Centro faces several challenges as it faces the future. One difficulty is the challenge of securing enough funding year in and year out to continue to serve the most impoverished workers in Denver. As immigration politics have heated up across the nation, some foundations and city officials have begun to steer away from public support of organizations of El Centro. For long term sustainability, El Centro is seeking ways to generate its own organizational income. Innovative programs like the companion card allow workers an economical way to bank their money, while also keeping income within their community financial institution—in this case, El Centro itself. Projects like the women’s project encourage participants to contribute a portion of their earned income and weekly wages back to El Centro in order to maintain its services. And every year, El Centro’s individual donor base grows. With continued growth in innovations like this, El Centro hopes to have the diversified funding base to withstand withering public support, and to supplement foundation support.

LEGAL/POLITICAL CHALLENGES

Recently, Aurora city officials have begun a policy of ticketing immigrant day laborers as they seek work off street corners. Colorado is home to a number of powerful and well-organized anti-immigrant groups who consistently lobby city, state and national officials to cut off funding to El Centro and to otherwise illegalize its services. Some national reform efforts propose to make it a felony to offer the kind of programs El Centro provides to immigrants. It is a challenging legal and political environment for a grassroots group like El Centro.

But El Centro is committed to bringing pragmatic and humane immigration solutions to the Denver community over the long run. El Centro is committed to insuring that the voices of day laborers, who are so often “silent and despised,” are included in the public debate. El Centro is part of a regional network of immigrant rights groups, united under the Colorado
Immigrant Rights Coalition, and plays a unique role in bringing hidden voices into public dialogue.

As the community comes to witness the humanity of the day labor immigrants, who are their hard-working neighbors, and as programs like English language instruction, indoor work halls, and punishing predatory employers are understood as pragmatic innovations that improve the local quality of life, El Centro is confident that the legal and political challenges can be overcome.

GENTRIFICATION AND DISPLACEMENT

Can El Centro continue to serve impoverished day laborers in a Denver neighborhood that is rapidly gentrifying? El Centro, located just a few blocks east of Denver’s Coors Field baseball stadium, is in the heart of the rapidly changing Curtis Park neighborhood.

Many of the traditionally poor inner-city neighborhoods of Denver have seen significant changes in the past ten years. Neighborhoods like Five Points and Curtis Park have witnessed changing community dynamics as new loft projects and more wealthy residents move into neighborhoods once relegated to Denver’s most impoverished. Although these changes have brought many positive aspects to the Denver urban environment, they have presented El Centro with new challenges.

Many area residents, businesses and some local officials are seeing El Centro as increasingly out of place in an upwardly developing neighborhood. Concerned with this development, Denver Councilman At-Large, Doug Linkhart, has wondered: “How do you support a city on quality of life issues and not just pursue economic growth?”

There are already some troubling signs for El Centro. Recently, there have been efforts to close down area bus depots that serve low-income immigrants traveling to and from the border. In 2005, a local drop-in night shelter was forced to close its night-time operations as neighborhood activists stepped up to enforce zoning rules against an over-concentration of shelters in the area. All around El Centro, properties are selling for escalating prices and upscale lofts and retail projects are springing out of once abandoned lots. Local officials have complained to El Centro staff about its workers traveling up and down the sidewalks and from El Centro, and about them stepping outside of El Centro to smoke cigarettes.

These are signs of a possible struggle to come: will an organization serving low-income, often homeless, immigrant workers continue to be welcome in one of Denver’s most rapidly gentrifying communities?

As evidence of the seriousness of the challenge, consider the Denver Downtown Area Plan of 2007. The plan, an official effort to expand upon the Downtown Plan of 1986, seeks to revitalize and redevelop many of neighborhoods surrounding downtown Denver. John Desmond, vice president of urban planning and environment for the Downtown Denver Partnership, said of the El Centro neighborhood that this new plan would hopefully bring in new influences: “This is an opportunity to create a 21st century neighborhood where newer elements would dictate the character.” El Centro, which is in the heart of these changing neighborhoods, may find itself in a precarious position when the Downtown Area Plan begins to unfold.

Indicating the seriousness of the challenge, the authors of the Denver Downtown Area Plan of 2007 have offered up pictures of the “new downtown” that they hope will emerge in the El Centro area. The before and after pictures (next page) imagine a bustling new upscale “urban village” to replace the current collection of low-income uses around El Centro. Gone is the low-income immigrant bus depot, replaced with an outdoor mall. Gone is the Denver Housing Authority land, replaced with a nice park filled with professionals and families. Gone is El Centro itself, replaced with a loft-retail development.

Although these renderings of a future Denver are troubling to El Centro supporters—we know we have the power to insure that El Centro is not overlooked and displaced in the new Denver. El Centro will remain a valuable and necessary fixture in the city of Denver. As the El Centro area continues to change, and the Denver economy with it, El Centro will remain relevant for the scores of laborers that live and subsist on a daily basis.

“This notion of coming to America and going to a street corner and doing day labor is not new. For hundreds of years it has been this way. They come here to improve their lives, and they start off doing day labor.”

— Chris Newman, Founder El Centro Legal Clinic
The fact is that El Centro is a committed fixture of the Curtis Park community, and will offer its services far into the future. Helping insure El Centro’s future, El Centro now owns title to its property, and is completing a major renovation project on site.

As long as there remain low-wage immigrants near downtown, as there always have been since Denver’s founding, El Centro will remain a neighborhood fixture, opening its doors to all and helping to translate America to the bewildered immigrant while bringing the voices, culture and hopeful energy of immigrants to a nation that has always benefited from their contributions.

There may come a time when the location of El Centro no longer reflects the reality of where day laborers are gathering in Denver, but the principles and programs of El Centro will remain. Staying in touch with the needs and desires of day laborers has been the purpose of El Centro from day one, and it will continue to be in the years ahead.

“El Centro is exactly what the city needs, a place where people might otherwise be on the street with no place to go; a place that belongs to them.”

—Colleen Breslin, Pro Bono Legal Clinic Lawyer
“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”
— Creed of the
Statue of Liberty,
From Emma Lazarus