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**HEADLINE:** City works on day-laborer wage protection Many of the victims are immigrants who are cheated out of their pay. A Denver proposal would make wage theft a local crime.

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**BODY:**

Denver has moved to the cusp of launching new legal and police protections for day laborers who often are cheated out of their wages.

Cheered on by labor advocates, Councilman Doug Linkhart is proposing that wage theft be made a local crime.

Day laborers work at the poorest end of the employment spectrum, performing all sorts of manual labor from construction to landscaping. They move frequently and often are homeless. Many are immigrants, some undocumented.

And, local leaders say, day laborers are easy to victimize.

"I don't like the fact that there are businesses out there that over and over again hire people and intentionally don't pay them," Linkhart said.

Wage theft over \$500 is illegal under Colorado law, but the statute leaves most day laborers, who most often are owed less than \$500, out of the loop.

In Denver, the wage-theft campaign has been led by labor advocates who try to help cheated workers recover lost wages, most of the time with little success. They have been meeting with police and city officials to find a way to deal with the issue.

If the plan is approved, Denver will become the third U.S. city to create a system that includes law enforcement, government and advocates to protect day laborers' rights. Austin, Texas, was the first in 2002, followed by Kansas City.

**El Centro Humanitario** para Los Trabajadores, a nonprofit day labor and immigrant center in Denver, has been inundated with complaints about wage theft in recent years.

Since 2002, the agency has helped recover \$30,000 in wages for workers. Still, more than 50 workers await \$60,000 that hasn't been recovered.

Some duped laborers never step forward because they have no practical legal recourse, said Minsun Ji, executive director of El Centro.

Johnny Martinez, 25, is waiting to be paid \$240 after working three days at a construction site. The employers picked him up each morning at Stout Street and Park Avenue West to dig trenches, paint and pick up trash. He was told he would be paid at the end of the week. But on the fourth day, they didn't show up.

"There are people who feel they can treat people however they want," Martinez said.

The Denver proposal would make any amount of wage theft a crime and provide protections for all workers, regardless of citizenship, Linkhart said. "This law would protect all people."

Linkhart will present the proposal to the Economic Development Committee today. If approved, it goes to the City Council for consideration.

Advocates estimate that more than half of the nation's day laborers have been victims of wage theft.

Police involvement will go further to protect workers and recover wages, Ji said. "When we send out a letter requesting payment, they often don't care. But when we send a second letter that says you must pay or you'll be prosecuted, that will make a difference."

Since a similar program began three years ago in Austin, 13 employers have been arrested, and more than \$100,000 has been recovered for laborers, according to the Central Texas Immigrant Workers Rights Center.

The system is slow but it is working, said Julien Ross, director of the Austin center. An important component is that a worker's citizenship not be questioned, Ross said.

"A day laborer is someone who does temporary work, and it has nothing to do with immigration status," he said. "Once work is performed, it doesn't matter who performs that work, they have to be compensated."

In Denver, a database is being created to track wage-theft cases statewide. The database, funded with a city grant, will catalog the number of victims and pinpoint repeat offenders. It should be running in a couple of months.

Larry Lanaro will likely be an entry in the database.

Lanaro dug trenches for a man who promised to pay \$10 an hour. But when the week was up, neither Lanaro nor any of the other workers were paid.

“He began putting us off, he said he'd pay later and later and then he disappeared with his equipment,” said Lanaro, 47. “I just brushed it off. I figured there was nothing I could do.”

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