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**HEADLINE:** STRANDED IN THE LAND OF PLENTY;  
LABORERS WHO CHASED A DREAM TO DENVER DISCOVER IT'S A MIRAGE

**BYLINE:** Javier Erik Olvera, ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

**BODY:**

The banner that hangs on the old mechanic's garage says "Day laborers available here."

It's 6 a.m., and a group of men desperate to find work pour into the California Avenue (California Street) building as its door slides open.

Mario Garcia, an immigrant with mahogany skin and silvery hair, is among them. The 61-year-old watches the clock - biting his lower lip, burying his hands in his pockets, questioning whether his odyssey into this country was worth it.

He's been jobless since he and his wife sneaked across the Texas border one night about two months ago in hopes of building a retirement nest egg. He has since learned to track the hour hand - watching it move past 7 a.m., 8 a.m., then 9 a.m. - praying another day doesn't slip by without a paycheck.

A construction worker by trade, he has yet to find a stable job and fears he and his wife will end up on the streets if something doesn't come soon.

"This isn't the way it's supposed to be," says Garcia, glancing out the door of the Centro Humanitario Para Los Trabajadores' (The Humanitarian Center for Workers) to see if an employer is heading in.

Immigrants consider leaving

Garcia is among the immigrants still coming to this country even as it reels from three years of economic instability. Facing an uncertain future, Garcia - a grandfather of seven - is now thinking about leaving, and he's not the only one.

Although data is hard to come by, interviews suggest some immigrants who came to Colorado for better lives want to leave. Some are considering moves to other states while

others to the very towns and villages they left behind - a surprising twist in the immigration story.

"This is the . . . horror story of the economic downturn," said Estevan Flores, executive director of the Latino/a Research & Policy Center in Denver.

Polly Baca, executive director of the Latin American Research and Service Agency in Denver, has seen several immigrants leave because of the weak economy.

"I keep hoping (the economy) is going to bounce back, but I haven't seen it," she said. "I don't sense any great relief."

While there are signs of recovery, joblessness is still high, especially in industries where many immigrants find jobs. Since July 2002, the number of jobs in Colorado declined by 21,600 - with roughly 19,800 in construction and manufacturing, state labor data show.

The hopeful are still arriving

Certainly, the United States is still the land of opportunity for many immigrants. In Colorado, the foreign-born population went from 142,434 to 369,903 between 1990 and 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau reports.

That trend continues, according to a recent Census Bureau survey, which shows the number of foreign-born Coloradans increased from 8.5 percent in 2000 to 9.8 percent last year.

They come because the economy in their homeland may be worse, and they know if they can find steady work, they'll secure decent lives, Flores said.

The trick is lining up a job before they arrive. Otherwise they have to turn to options, such as day labor, he said.

Places like Centro Humanitario are not short of workers, some of whom said they are on the verge of calling it quits. Each day, 65 people - of all ethnic backgrounds - cram into the center, where they linger and hope they'll be one of the handful chosen for work through a lottery system, said Javier Carrizales, center manager.

"Anywhere they go, they'll find the same situation until they've made bridges with employers," Carrizales said.

Garcia admits he didn't have that bridge.

Long before his hair turned gray and wrinkles cracked his face, Garcia thought about what life would be like in a country where anyone could become a success story.

He put the dream on hold after he married and raised two sons, who are now 35 and 34,

married and have children of their own.

As a construction worker in Toluca, Mexico, Garcia made decent money by Mexico standards - about \$480 a month - and the couple owned their home. But he figured he could pull down thousands each month and build a sound retirement on El Otro Lado - The Other Side.

Earlier this summer, he floated a risky proposition to his wife of 37 years. She agreed, and one day in July, they sneaked past federal authorities into El Paso, Texas, where they met their "coyote," who agreed to take them deeper into the country for \$3,000.

"This is it - the new beginning," Garcia's wife, Florentina Gaona, recalls thinking when they made it into the United States.

But their optimism began to fade soon after they landed in Denver and work didn't come.

Garcia gets day labor work at least once a week, earning about \$80 each time - barely enough for living essential, he says.

Goana, on the other hand, has gotten day labor work only twice because most employers who go into the center are looking for men to do hard labor, she said.

"I didn't expect it to be this way," Garcia said. "I thought it would be easy here if we took the risk to come across."

He's considering going to another state, but at this point, he's not sure which one. If he can't find steady work soon, he'll likely turn around and go back across the border to resume his old life, he said.

Bottom rung feels the pinch

Simon Peter is a 40-year-old who came to this country from Australia a decade ago, lured by the America depicted in such 1960s television shows as *The Brady Bunch* and *Get Smart*.

His visa expired years ago, he said. Now, he just makes ends meet, finding enough day labor to pay for the essentials and to rent a cot for \$100 a month in a homeless shelter.

He's wanted to return home for years, but hasn't been able to land a steady job so he can save money for a one-way flight.

"The thing with the economy is that it hurt the people at the bottom first," says Peter.

Jesus Oscar Galindo agrees. He's a stocky 28-year-old who came to the United States seven years ago from Chihuahua, Mexico, and landed a \$15-an-hour job as a sheetrock installer. He's been in Denver less than a year, and finds himself curling up on a free

homeless shelter cot each night because he can't find a stable job.

He's at Centro Humanitario every day, trying to earn enough for a bus ticket to either Washington, D.C., or Florida, where he has secure restaurant work. Like the others, he leaves most days without earning any money. Recently, he said he'd be back at the center the next day. But he couldn't make any promises about next week or next month.

"If I get money, I'll take the next bus out of here," he says.

**NOTES:**

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cq designates an omission or unpublished correction.

**GRAPHIC:** Color Photo (2), Laborer Octavio Chavez, 24, waits patiently for work at a center, operated by the nonprofit organization **El Centro Humanitario** Para Los, Trabajadores. The center helps find day labor for people without steady jobs., Chavez came from Mexico City almost two years ago and has been in Denver for a, year. BARRY GUTIERREZ , ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS, CAPTION: Day laborers Liliana Arcos Cruz, right, and Florentina stay busy, building pinatas while they wait for work at **El Centro Humanitario** Para Los, Trabajadores in Denver recently. BARRY GUTIERREZ , ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

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