

'Invasion' target
Protesters say center for day labor fosters illegal immigration
Myung Oak Kim, Rocky Mountain News
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It's not quite 7 a.m., still dark outside the lavender-painted former car wash in Curtis Park.

The sidewalk outside El Centro Humanitario para los Trabajadores, a day-labor center at California Street and Park Avenue West, is mostly empty. But inside, the spartan warehouse-like room is already bustling.

Thirty-two men - many of whom slept in shelters the night before - shuffle in and register their names in the computer, hoping to find work.

Seated at a long metal table near the front of the room, a Peruvian man and two Mexican men play conquien, a card game similar to gin rummy.

Nearby, six African-American men watch a hip-hop video on TV.

Rex Harley, a trained electrician and former computer programmer, sits near the lockers, reading a book about Jesus.

"This place is what I call a bridge," Harley said last Tuesday. "It's a place where people discover their dignity."

But for some activist groups, El Centro is a symbol of everything that is wrong with the country's handling of illegal immigrants.

The Colorado Minutemen and Colorado Alliance for Immigration Reform are incensed that El Centro uses a "don't ask/don't tell" policy and helps illegal immigrants find work.

Intent on curbing what they call "the invasion of America," these groups and others across the country have shifted their focus from patrolling the U.S.-Mexican border to targeting day-labor agencies like El Centro.

Members have been videotaping employers who come to the center to pick up workers and they plan to send those tapes to immigration officials.

They also confronted Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper at an El Centro fundraiser last month and about 15 people protested outside the agency Jan. 7.

More than 200 immigrant-rights supporters held a counterprotest at the same time.

Forced into the center of the local immigration battle, El Centro employees fear the agency could be shut down if increasing concerns about illegal immigration cause lawmakers to pass harsh legislation in Congress.

"It's hard to really tell where we'll be next year," said Minsun Ji, El Centro's executive director. "It's a very difficult time right now."

Hickenlooper, a prominent supporter of El Centro, said solutions to the immigration quandary need to come from Washington.

"Targeting places like El Centro that focus on workforce development for low-wage earners doesn't solve anything," Hickenlooper said last week through a spokeswoman.

If the agency were closed, illegal immigrants would not be the only ones affected.

At El Centro, a significant portion of the registered clients who come in daily for work - and close to half of the men and women who showed up Tuesday morning - are citizens or permanent residents.

Harley was born in Florida. The 46-year-old man with a professor's vocabulary said he's aware of concerns about illegal immigrants, and it bothers him that some illegal immigrants sell drugs.

But he said that problem does not reach El Centro.

The nonprofit agency's three full-time employees take pains to ensure that the 1,084 people registered at the center are clean of drugs or alcohol and work hard when they get picked for a job, mostly manual labor that pays \$8 to \$15 an hour.

"All you see here are the ones who are willing to work," Harley said.

Hardworking or not, illegal immigrants are hurting America, said Terri McNabb, a caterer from Thornton who was one of the most vocal protesters outside El Centro on Jan. 7.

A member of Defend Colorado Now and Colorado Minutemen, McNabb blames illegal immigrants for driving down wages and weakening unions in this country.

She said her father is a retired master mason and that people in his union crew could make \$24 an hour.

"How can we compete with people who will work for \$8 an hour laying brick?" she asked.

El Centro was born out of public concern about day laborers, mostly Mexican immigrants, who had been gathering at the corner of Stout Street and Park Avenue West to find work.

In early 2002, Minsun Ji was working for the American Friends Service Committee when her boss sent her to help the workers. The result was El Centro Humanitario para los Trabajadores, a name picked by the workers.

Building was donated

The agency found a home in June 2002, when Fred Pasternack began renting his 6,000-square-foot former car wash to the group. Last year, he donated the building to the nonprofit.

Today, the group operates with a \$263,000 budget, funded mostly by private foundations. The agency gets \$50,000 a year from government agencies, including the city of Denver.

El Centro has 11 donated computers that workers use to look for jobs. Denver University law students volunteer once a week to help workers collect back pay from scofflaw employers - some \$40,000 last year.

Workers registered at the center are picked for jobs through a lottery system. The agency does not get any of the workers' pay and does not charge a fee to the employers.

Most jobs involve construction, landscaping, cleaning, moving and other low-skilled labor.

About a dozen women meet each week to make crafts, including jewelry, cushions and piñatas, many of which hang from the ceiling inside the center's main room.

For many workers, El Centro is their ticket to survival, a way to earn money to pay for food, transportation and housing. Some of the illegal immigrants send their earnings back to their families in Mexico and South America.

Other workers have recently lost jobs or plunged into depression or substance abuse because of a family trauma.

The common thread among them is the desire to earn a living.

Ji said she is not overly concerned about the Minutemen protests or the stream of nasty anti-immigrant phone messages her agency receives.

She said she's most worried about House Resolution 4437, the Border Protection, Antiterrorism and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005 that passed the House last month.

Among other things, the 137-page bill would allow a citizen to sue an agency such as hers and also sue law enforcement agencies to force prosecution of places like El Centro that help illegal immigrants.

"This is the worst law you can even think of," Ji said. "It makes it criminal for El Centro to exist."

By 9 a.m. last Tuesday, almost 70 workers have registered at the center. So far, only one man has gotten work.

About 30 minutes earlier, Chuck Saxton, a contractor from Bennett who remodels homes, walked in, looking for someone he's hired in the past. But that man hasn't showed up, so another

man gets the nod.

"Hi, Roberto. You want to work? Well, let's go," Saxton says.

Saxton drove down to the center to support it during the demonstration.

Before the protest began, Saxton walked across California Street and talked to a gray-haired female protester.

He said she told him that she grew up near the Mexican border, had Mexican friends and was not a racist. She said she came to protest the center because the U.S. Constitution says that Americans are supposed to stop invasions.

Saxton told her that the Constitution is a living document, open to interpretation, to which she flatly disagreed.

Saxton sympathizes with the emotions of the protesters.

"I think it's important that we acknowledge that they have genuine concerns and fears," Saxton said. "But I think their position isn't right."

Illegal immigrants "are doing work that isn't going to get done otherwise," he said. "That's just the way it is. We're not going to send 10 to 12 million people back to Mexico."

Saxton said he has hired some 100 workers from El Centro.

He said before coming to El Centro, he hired people through another local labor agency, paying more than the \$8 to \$15 an hour he pays at El Centro. But those workers did a poor job and many were "falling-down drunk."

Status not checked

Saxton said he does not check the immigration status of the workers and that he has never had trouble with government agencies.

"These are men that are willing to do work that I can't find anywhere else," Saxton said.

Just after 10 a.m. last Tuesday, the center received a call from a man who wanted three men to move furniture. He said he would pay \$8 an hour and would come at 12:30 to pick them up.

Alonzo Rodriguez, an illegal Mexican immigrant who sleeps at a shelter, got the job and picked two co-workers to fill the order.

Rodriguez, 29, said his last job from El Centro was the previous week, when he did a four-hour plumbing job for \$60.

He believes he could gain legal status if he married his girlfriend, an American citizen, and she sponsored him, but they can't afford the \$800 or so in filing fees.

While Rodriguez ate an instant noodle meal in a Styrofoam bowl, Leta Estes sat silently at a table as she does almost every weekday.

Estes, 49, was born in Texas and now lives in Park Hill. She has a ninth-grade education and raised five children (her youngest is in high school). She did nursing work for more than a decade before suffering a shoulder injury.

Estes said she switched to cleaning work after the injury because it is easier for her.

Now, Estes is secretary of El Centro's newly created Queen of Cleaning group and a newly appointed board member of the job center.

She said that of the dozen women in her cleaning group, about three of them could be illegal immigrants. She said it doesn't bother her that illegal immigrants are here.

"They're human, too."

'No Terrorista'

At the back of El Centro's main room, a sign used during last week's protest leans against a makeshift shed amid five brooms.

In red marker on a white background are the words "Somos Trabajadores No Terrorista." ("We are workers, not terrorists").

Dented hard hats, hoes, shovels and other landscaping equipment are scattered inside the shed, built with chicken-wire walls and 2-by-4s.

Dave Rupert also held a sign with Spanish words during the protest.

The retired car fleet manager and Air Force veteran from Arvada walked silently back and forth along the sidewalk.

His sign said "Nuestra Casa No Es Su Casa" ("Our house is not your house").

Rupert said he has gone to the Mexican border twice to patrol with the Minutemen. He said he's not against legal immigrants - his grandparents came here from Germany - and he is not a racist.

"I believe in helping people, but not the way this is being handled," Rupert said, referring to the perceived lax enforcement of immigration laws.

He said there's too much fingerpointing in the immigration debate. He'd like to see real reform.

And, he added, "I would like to see it done peacefully."

kimm@RockyMountainNews.com or 303-892-2361