

Austin May Open 2nd Day Labor Site

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Austin is cracking down on day laborers who are looking for work somewhere besides the city-designated site your taxes pay for.

Now, city leaders are considering a second day labor site in South Austin. It could open as early as this summer, costing more than a quarter of a million dollars each year.

Every morning, hundreds line up for work. Trucks come through, picking up their crews for the day.

The problem is the demand for honest work is huge. The ones that don't get picked for the day go somewhere else and face huge fines.

It is day laboring. It's a tough way to feed your family.

"We're not asking for nothing else. We're just begging for work. That's all we want is work," day laborer Geraldo Cruz Perez said.

Begging for work can cost you up to \$500. Austin police are handing out tickets.

"The solicitation can be enforced against workers, who are simply looking for a day's work," Emily Timm with the Workers' Defense Project said.

Day laborers are getting hit with fines from a little-known city ordinance, which negates any money they would earn in a day.

Unless they're like Perez...

"I don't want to carry a ticket in my wallet, so I just throw the ticket away," Perez said.

KXAN NBC Austin found Perez at the Home Depot on St. Johns. He was not alone. Dozens of workers and truckloads of prospective employers meet there. All of them face huge fines.

Whether you know it or not, you're also paying for day labor to the tune of a quarter-million dollars a year.

"It's basically a place where laborers and employers can match up and exchange labor for compensation," Director of Health and Human Services David Lurie said.

The Department of Health and Human Services operates a day labor site on 51st and I-35. They're looking at opening another site in South Austin. It was the informal spots that led the city to open the site.

The city placed 22,000 workers last year. The site is open and staffed six days a week, to more than 150 workers a day.

They sign up through a lottery system, and 70 percent of them get work and cash every day. The other 30 percent go elsewhere or wait for the next day. It is physical work most won't do.

"It's open to anyone who chooses to take advantage of it. It's simply a site that creates the opportunity in a safe, structured, organized and efficient environment," Lurie said.

For Perez and others like him, the city's day labor site is not always an option. Some have deportation or immigration concerns.

Perez receives dialysis for a failing kidney and can't always find transportation.

"Honestly, I really need a kidney transplant, cause it's kind of tough to live like this for the rest of your life," Perez said.

He admits he'll go anywhere to feed his family, but fears anywhere might lead to a ticket and a fine he can't pay.

"Well, it'd be nice if the cops wouldn't mess with us no more. You know, just leave us alone. We come over here just looking for work. Trying to do the right things," Perez said.

The city has surveyed employers and workers and say the need for a second day labor site is tough to ignore. They're looking at sites in South Austin and say it has to have access for employers and a proximity to bus lines, so workers can get there.

Many of these workers are getting tickets while trying to find work. A city ordinance prohibits solicitation on a street, sidewalk or in a private parking lot.

A local mission is helping those workers.

Manos de Cristo is a Presbyterian outreach mission, located right behind the day labor site on 51st.

It offers workers English language workshops, help with financial planning and citizenship classes.

In some cases, the mission is paying the solicitation tickets given to the day laborers.

"Most of the money they earn in a day is going to go and pay that fee, and that could mean a difference between food for themselves and their families or no food," Manos de Cristo Rev. Lydia Hernandez said.

Manos de Cristo has been in Austin for 18 years. They help about 23,000 people a year.