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Businesses say they will stop hiring off-duty police to patrol laborers

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Day laborers and activists in east Phoenix celebrated a victory Saturday, after several business owners said they would stop hiring off-duty police to deter laborers from soliciting work there.

But the fight isn't over, activists said, citing the need for a day-labor center in the area.

Nearly 100 day laborers and activists protested Saturday morning in front of M.D. Pruitt's Home Furnishings on Thomas Road and 34th Street.

Protestors chose Pruitt's because 10 months ago part-owner Mike Sensing rallied about two-dozen area business owners to hire off-duty officers to patrol their properties. The practice is common of malls and businesses grappling with day-worker issues.

On Friday, Pruitt's announced that it would no longer hire the off-duty officers who can issue citations for trespassing and impeding traffic to the workers.

"We want to have assurance that customers are being able to access to our business," Sensing said Saturday. "We are absolutely not trying to stop someone from making a living. We're trying to make a living as well."

In recent weeks, day-labor protests outside the business had escalated with activists vowing to rally there each Saturday leading up to Christmas until the situation is resolved.

The protests packed a nasty punch for Pruitt's, where Sensing said business dipped 25 percent during the lucrative Thanksgiving weekend. Overall business decreased by 5 to 10 percent since the protests, he added.

Day-laborer activist Salvador Reza announced Pruitt's decision to the contingent of day laborers lined along Thomas Road on Saturday. But he reiterated his rally cry for an official day-labor center.

"The struggle is not over," Reza said. "We think it's a good step, but we still want the negotiations for the work center to continue."

He said the planned protests likely would not continue.

The Republic on Thursday confirmed that activists and city officials are searching for property in the area where the workers could gather peacefully. Those involved declined to comment.

The day-laborer dilemma is symptomatic of the federal government's failure to pass an immigration policy that would legally allow the workers to find jobs, city officials and activists said.

"(U.S. leaders) are making immigration their whipping boy," said Mercedes Mercado Ochoa, 63, who participated in the protest. She wants a faster and easier legal immigration process.

Rey Ausencio, 42, a day laborer from Toluca, Mexico, is one of hundreds of workers that flock daily to that area to look for day work.

"We couldn't find work here when the police were here," Ausencio said. "They would stop and give out tickets."

In the Valley, work centers have been at the heart of a hostile battle over how cities should deal with undocumented workers.

In 2003, the Phoenix City Council spent \$120,000 to open Phoenix's only official day-labor center, the Macehualli Work Center at 16801 N. 25th St. It's operated by the non-profit Tonatierra group.

But a state law passed last year now prohibits cities from funding or operating day-labor centers.