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Day labor for living wage;

Program ups pay for its immigrant temporary workers

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Enrique Najera sometimes makes \$150 for a full day's work. Those days come rarely.

Najera is a day laborer whose workday usually lasts no longer than three or four hours. On slow weeks, he gets only two jobs and makes less than \$100. Najera, who says he sends money to Mexico to help support his four children, sleeps at homeless shelters or friends' rooms because he can't stretch his wages far enough to cover rent.

On Friday, the San Francisco Day Labor Program took a step toward helping Najera and other day laborers by increasing the minimum wage for its workers. The laborers will now charge \$50 for the first three hours of work and an additional \$15 per hour thereafter. The old flat rate was \$12 an hour.

"We don't get work every day," the Spanish-speaking Najera said through an interpreter. "Whatever extra we make is good."

A group of immigrant workers, with the help of community leaders, founded the program 13 years ago. The idea was to create an orderly way of getting temporary jobs from a central location.

The program, which has been run by the nonprofit La Raza Centro Legal since 2000, operates out of two trailers at 17th and Hampshire streets near Franklin Square. Employers call the site to hire workers, who are organized on a rotating list. After a laborer is hired for a job, he is moved to the bottom of the list and works his way up again.

The program's 150 laborers sometimes go days without a job. They start gathering around the trailers at about 6:30 a.m. and while away the day playing soccer, reading newspapers or chatting as they wait for work.

"There's too many people and not enough work," said Jesus Garcia, 55, who returned to the trailers Friday after spending the past four months working on farms in the Central Valley.

Luis Rivas, 22, came to San Francisco from Honduras two months ago and immediately joined the program. On Friday, he was hired for only the fourth time, although a couple of the jobs lasted more than one day.

During the past month, the laborers held several meetings to discuss the idea of raising the minimum wage. Among their concerns was that employers would balk at the higher rate and that they would lose business.

"The workers responded by saying that once employers saw the quality of work, they won't mind paying the increased wage," program organizer Hillary Ronen said. "Every worker gave an example of getting paid \$15 or \$20 instead of the minimum \$12 because employers were so satisfied with the work."

Renee Saucedo of La Raza Centro Legal said no employer had complained about the wage hike Friday. Saucedo also said that the program had recently received \$165,000 in funding from the city for the next year after getting no support for the past two years. E-mail Cicero A. Estrella at cestrella@sfchronicle.com.