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Some day laborers choose streets over hiring halls

By: WILLIAM FINN BENNETT - Staff Writer

ESCONDIDO ---- Early each day, the hiring ritual begins along Quince Street between Mission and Washington avenues, with dozens of day laborers hanging out on sidewalks and in parking lots, carefully observing traffic.

If a driver slows down and makes eye contact, as many as a dozen men rush to the vehicle to be one of those picked for jobs that can pay up to \$12 an hour.

It's a ritual that occurs daily on hundreds of street corners throughout the region.

But not everyone is happy with the these curbside free-for-all.

At least two business officials on that street say they are losing customers who are scared off by the large number of men loitering outside their establishments.

A sign on the wall in front of military surplus store G.I. Joe's says in both English and Spanish: "No Loitering."

Yet many day laborers aren't getting the message, a store employee said Thursday.

He said that when customers pull into the parking lot, all too often they are immediately surrounded by men seeking jobs.

"I don't fault anybody for trying to get work, but when you are hurting a business to do it, they should know it's a no-no," said Carl Vaughn, 48. "A lot of our customers are saying, 'We won't come back, because we don't want people running up to us.' "

And officials with a nonprofit day-laborer hiring hall in the same block say the increasing street-side labor hustle is siphoning job opportunities for other day laborers who are patiently awaiting their turn for a job offer inside the hiring hall.

Organizing labor

Interfaith Community Services, an organization that also provides meals and social services to the needy, has facilities in San Marcos, Vista, Oceanside and Escondido. The Escondido site was set up more than four years ago, spokeswoman Deborah Andreasen said.

For the first 18 months, the nonprofit focused on its long-standing mission of helping low-income families with their food, housing, counseling and rehabilitation needs.

About three years ago, Interfaith officials made the decision to set up the Escondido

hiring hall after day laborers began to ask for help in tracking down contractors who had failed to pay them for their work, Andreasen said.

But if they were going to start hooking up workers with employers, Interfaith officials decided, they were going to do it right by providing a measure of protection to workers and those who hire them, Andreasen said.

Before they can participate in the hiring program, all workers must be screened by health professionals for any physical or mental impairments that could prevent them from working or that might pose the risk of on-the-job injuries, Andreasen said. In addition, the workers' names and addresses are recorded.

"We make sure they are healthy and ready to go to work," she said.

Labor hall manager Gabriela Candido said workers benefit, because employers are asked to provide their names and contact information so the organization can follow up with them whenever necessary.

The hall uses the names to find employers who have not paid their workers, Candido said.

In addition to providing workers and those who hire them with a measure of security, the program also offers workers free English and health and safety classes. And helping workers to improve themselves and holding them and employers accountable can only benefit the community as a whole, Andreasen said.

"They are trying to better their situation and are able to speak and interact with the community ---- this shows they are making an effort," she said.

Workers siphoning jobs from hall

At the hiring hall, workers show up for a hot breakfast each morning starting before dawn. At 6 a.m. sharp, numbered balls corresponding to their names are drawn from a bingo cage to determine the order in which they will be assigned jobs as employers show up. That is, those employers who make it as far as the labor hall parking lot.

A growing problem for Interfaith and the workers who participate in its hiring program is that all too often, the men loitering in the street snag jobs before employers even make it into the parking area.

While most of the hiring occurs early in the day, late Thursday morning, several workers were still hanging out on the sidewalk in front of G.I. Joe's. None of the five workers who were interviewed by the North County Times spoke English, and four of them said they were undocumented immigrants from Mexico.

All of them said in Spanish that they preferred trying to get work in the street over going through the hiring hall, because on the street, they don't have to wait as long to get jobs.

A local contractor said Thursday that he has been using Interfaith's hiring hall for about one year for his construction business. The contractor, who would not provide his name other than "John," said that using the hiring hall makes life much easier than hiring workers off the street. The hall, he said, is organized and orderly, while hiring men from the sidewalk often involves getting mobbed by potential workers.

Interfaith's hiring coordinator, Sergio Cardona, said that on the street, the competition between workers for jobs sometimes leads to fights.

"Outside, the strongest survive," he said.

Sweeps cut down on loitering

Hiring hall manager Candido said that while she couldn't say how many of the workers who use the hiring hall are undocumented immigrants, one thing is certain: The number of workers using the center has dropped and the number of workers on the street has increased since spring 2004, when the U.S. Border Patrol was patrolling the area and checking people's documentation.

One month after starting the high-profile patrols, known as sweeps, in the spring of that year, Border Patrol officials stopped the practice after a firestorm of protest from human rights activists who accuse the Border Patrol of human rights violations.

Cardona said that during the sweeps, most workers stopped trying to get jobs on the street and began using the hiring hall. In those days, the hall would typically have about 100 workers using its services each day, he added. A few months after the sweeps stopped, however, many workers returned to hanging out along Quince Street and abandoned the hiring hall. Now, the number of workers using the hall has fallen to about 50 a day, Cardona said.

The illegal immigrants who were hanging out in front of G.I. Joe's on Thursday said Border Patrol agents never bother them. Now and then, they said, Escondido police officers ask them to move on down the street and away from the businesses.

The manager of the Carl's Jr. restaurant on Quince Street and Mission Avenue said Thursday that, while police officers do ask day laborers to move out of his parking lot every other day or so, and at times arrest those who don't get the message, the problem persists.

Restaurant manager Oscar Hernandez, 33, said he immigrated to the United States from Mexico about 16 years ago under a guest-worker program for agricultural workers. Later, he earned his permanent residence in this country, he added.

So, it is with mixed emotions that he complains about the undocumented immigrants who hang out in his parking lot, he said. Hernandez said he believes the United States should start another guest-worker program that would allow workers to come to this

country safely and avoid risking their lives crossing the border in the desert.

However, the day laborers are hurting business at his restaurant, Hernandez said, noting the "Do Not Loiter" signs in the parking lot.

"Sometimes, when customers come in the driveway they get scared; it makes our business look bad," he said.

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