

Posted on Mon, Mar. 06, 2006

Hotline to help day laborers turn in contractors who cheat

POLICE SAY IMMIGRANTS DESERVE PROTECTION

By **Ken McLaughlin**

Mercury News

The city of Santa Cruz, which often takes controversial approaches to social issues, has now established what is believed to be the nation's first hotline for day laborers -- most of whom are undocumented -- to report unscrupulous employers.

The creation of the hotline, announced Monday, swiftly drew complaints from activists who said government should not offer such protections to illegal immigrants. "The number of illegal immigrants is exploding, and this will only encourage more to come," said Yeh Ling-Ling, executive director of the Oakland-based Diversity Alliance for a Sustainable America.

But police officials, citing reports that employers regularly abuse day laborers, said everyone deserves the protection of the law.

"When contractors pay less than agreed-upon wages, or do not pay at all, they violate labor laws and subject honest contractors to unfair competition," said Santa Cruz Police Chief Howard Skerry, whose department joined forces with a Latino community service agency to set up the hotline at (831) 420-5997.

The 24-hour automated hotline will allow workers to record their complaint, with the option of leaving their name, phone number or contact information. Skerry said police immediately will turn over the names of contractors, vehicle plate numbers, telephone numbers and other information to the Santa Cruz County District Attorney's office for further investigation and possible civil and criminal prosecution.

Even when prosecutions of unscrupulous contractors are not possible because victims choose to remain anonymous, authorities will be able to identify those employers and warn them that police are watching, police officials said Monday.

Several day laborers waiting for work in front of Santa Cruz's San Lorenzo Lumber on Monday afternoon said they liked the idea of an anonymous hotline to report employers who try to cheat them. They all agreed that the main problem lies with contractors, and not individual homeowners who hire them for landscaping, painting and cleaning.

"The homeowners don't cheat you," said Juan Gaona, 33, of Santa Cruz. "They feed us and treat us well. It's the greedy contractors that are the problem. A lot of workers don't get paid."

On Monday, workers from Santa Cruz's Familia Center, which worked with the police department to set up the hotline, began visiting day laborer sites to publicize the new program.

The hotline was born after a recent conversation between Yolanda Henry, executive director of the Familia Center and city Councilman Ryan Coonerty.

The two were discussing a proposed Santa Cruz ballot initiative that would raise the minimum wage in Surf City to \$9.25 -- \$2.50 higher than the state minimum. Henry pointed out that a larger problem for many members of the Latino community was "getting paid at all" for work, and they agreed a hotline would be a good solution.

They also agreed that illegal immigrants would be less reluctant to call if they knew that the program was affiliated with the well-known, 22-year-old Familia Center, and not just the police department. The hotline will be checked regularly by police.

Coonerty took the proposal to the police, who researched it and found that no other police agency in the country had such a hotline. Among the big cities contacted were San Jose, San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego, El Paso, Tex., and Phoenix, Ariz., according to detective Arnold Vasquez and administrative analyst Zach Friend.

In late January, researchers from UCLA, the University of Illinois and New School University in New York released the results of an 18-month groundbreaking study that found that day laborers regularly encounter abuse, dangerous workplaces and theft of wages.

Researchers interviewed 2,660 workers at 264 hiring sites in 20 states and Washington, D.C., including 14 worker sites in San Jose, one in Mountain View and several in San Francisco, Oakland and Berkeley. Some sites were informal gathering spots on busy streets or in front of home-improvement centers; others were organized day-worker centers.

The study found that three-quarters of the workers are undocumented -- and that 87 percent are from Mexico and Central America. Almost half of all day laborers experienced at least one instance of "wage theft" in the two months before being surveyed. Forty-four percent said they were denied food and water or breaks while on the job.

Gabriel Martinez, 45, of Watsonville, said he depends on the income from the casual labor market to supplement seasonal work in the strawberry fields. But he's always wary of potential employers -- particularly after he got cheated out of a day's pay by someone who hired him to deliver advertising circulars.

After that experience, he said, he started copying down the license plates of employers. He said he'd have no reluctance contacting the police hotline, even though he is an undocumented immigrant.

Sixteen percent of the day laborers in the national study had reported being "insulted" by police as they tried to seek work. Nine percent said they had been arrested.

But the workers interviewed Monday said that besides being chased off private property at the request of San Lorenzo Lumber's owners, they had no problems with the way they were treated by Santa Cruz police.

"I'll report the people who don't pay," Martinez said in Spanish. "I have no problem with that."

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