

# Day laborers weigh options in economic downturn

## *Finding little work, some undocumented laborers consider leaving*

By Alissa Figueroa

By 10:30 a.m. Roberto (who declined to give his last name) had been standing near the corner of Broad Street and Westchester Avenue for four hours. He was one of about 15 men in paint-splattered jeans and heavy coats waiting in sub-freezing temperatures for the chance to earn a day's pay for a day's work.

Earlier that morning, he'd been joined by about 40 men hoping to get picked out of the crowd for a construction or painting job. Only one or two found work. The rest, including Roberto, would go home for the day at around noon with cold hands filling otherwise empty pockets.

"I have about two months without working," said Roberto, who came to Port Chester from Mexico five years ago, in Spanish.

"At this point, the situation is getting critical," he added, not only for himself but for the family of four he helps support just outside of Mexico City.

Roberto chose this central location in the village to avoid the crowds at the Don Bosco Hiring Site, where dozens of men gather in the early morning hours scanning Don Bosco Place for pick-up trucks.

The economic downturn has hit Port Chester hard, and like so many, the village's day laborer population has been impacted, with many finding no more than a few days' work in the last two months.

At the nearby hiring site, located in the Don Bosco Community Center, stories like Roberto's are common amongst the men who use the site's services, which include a hot breakfast and lunch, as well as counseling and referral services, English language classes and workshops about workers' rights and immigration issues.

The Don Bosco Hiring Site, which opened in July 2003, is a project of the Westchester Hispanic Coalition, a White Plains-based non-profit that offers a wide range of services aimed at promoting integration and self-sufficiency to Westchester's Latino population, and Holy Rosary Church.

Though hiring site Coordinator Peggy Leib declined to say how many of the site's users are undocumented workers, they make up the majority, as most immigrants with

legal resident status have an easier time finding steady work at local businesses.

"People are getting desperate," said Leib, who has seen a substantial drop-off in the number of employers using the site this year. Of the 100 or so men who come to the site each morning, one or two will find work, she said. Last winter, that figure was closer to 15 or 20.

### Getting by

The number of laborers staying for the hot lunch at Don Bosco Community Center has almost doubled from about 90 each day to more than 175. The center's soup kitchen has started offering two afternoon meal seatings to meet the increased demand. According to Deacon Bill Vaccaro, of neighboring Holy Rosary Rectory, for many, this is the only hot meal they will eat all day.

Silas Maldonado was waiting outside the hiring site on Tuesday morning. He came to this country from Guatemala 10 years ago. Maldonado said he's never seen a winter this bad, but that he plans to stick it out, hoping for more work in the spring.

"The situation is bad everywhere," he rationalized.

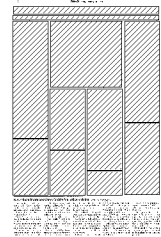
Right now Maldonado is living off of funds he saved through painting and landscaping jobs in the last few years. He eats lunch at Don Bosco most days and often stays to help out afterwards; wiping down tables and sweeping the floors.

"It's a service they are offering," said Maldonado, "So I feel a duty. Everyone helps out."

Leib has seen more of the men sticking around to volunteer or participate in the site's English classes on Monday and Wednesday mornings now that the small contractors who used to hire them stopped coming by.

Telmo Cabrera, who co-owns Port Chester-based Cabrera Home Improvements, Inc. with his brother, Luis, hires day laborers during busy weeks, but in the last few months, he's been unable to offer even his normal crew steady work.

"Normally winter is slow. There is work we can't do because of the weather," said Cabrera. "But this year, there's nothing at all. Before we would get maybe 10 calls each week [during the winter]. I haven't



worked since Dec. 22.”

Cabrera came to this country from Ecuador 14 years ago and is working in the U.S. legally. Both of his children were born here, and he doesn't consider going back a real option for his family.

“I'm hoping it doesn't get to that point,” said the contractor. “I have a feeling it's going to be alright, although it's going to take a little time.”

In the past Leib saw day laborers in Westchester County (she has worked in White Plains and Mt. Kisco) travel south to find work during the winter or even go back to their home countries during slow periods, but she hasn't seen this migration back and forth in recent years.

“The immigration raids have made people nervous,” said Leib, citing a March 2007 Immigration and Customs Enforcement rooming house raid in Mt. Kisco.

“If they go now, they're leaving for good,” she said.

It is difficult to know how many undocumented immigrants have left the country since the economy turned sour, said Graciela Heymann, director of the Westchester Hispanic Coalition.

“What I'm hearing anecdotally is that some people are leaving. But nobody is documenting this right now,” she said.

Heymann insists that we won't see the full impact of the economic crisis on the day laborer workforce until the work season starts again in the spring.

Those who choose to stay are doing their best to get by. Some, said Leib, are receiving money from family members in their home country—a reversal of the usual flow of remissions.

#### **A safety net**

Part of what makes this sector particularly vulnerable during economic hard times is that, unlike legal workers, they are not eligible for benefits like food stamps, temporary cash assistance and unemployment insurance.

“These people are working and paying taxes during normal times, they should have the benefit of a safety net,” said Heymann, going on to explain that undocumented workers pay property tax indirectly through rental payments and pay sales tax when they purchase products or food.

Some pay income tax as well. According to Leib, most of the undocumented workers

that use the hiring site's services file taxes using an individual tax identification number, or ITIN, in place of a social security number, for which they are not eligible as illegal immigrants.

ITINs were introduced in 1996 by the Internal Revenue Service to encourage non-citizens working in the United States to file taxes.

The undocumented workers at Don Bosco who file taxes do so as self-employed workers, then send either a personal check or a money order to the I.R.S. for the amount they owe. Many do so in order to open a bank account and qualify for credit, said Leib.

“A big motivation is the hope that filing will help them if there is immigration reform,” she added. “They want to have proof that they are working and paying their taxes.”

According to the hiring site coordinator, it's also helpful to have a record of their wages when obtaining day care or healthcare services that use a sliding scale and require proof of income to determine payment.

Miguel Medina, of Smart Tax Services on North Main Street, helped more than 100 Port Chester residents file taxes with ITINs last year. He said almost everyone who comes to him to get help filing taxes ends up paying the federal government, sometimes using a payment plan if necessary.

Anibal Cardozo is the general manager of the Jackson Hewitt tax service office, also located on North Main Street. Cardozo estimated that out of every 1,000 customers he helps, 250 file taxes using an ITIN.

“A lot of people file taxes because they are in the process of applying for their papers,” explained Cardozo.

Some also file because they expect to get a refund check, he added. While undocumented workers are not eligible for the earned income tax credit, they can receive child credits if they have American-born children, adding an extra incentive to file tax returns.

Under federal law, the I.R.S. cannot share information from applicants with any other agency, so many undocumented workers feel secure in applying for ITINs.

“[Recent immigrants] see that others have filed taxes for many years without problems, so they feel comfortable doing it,” said Leib.

According to a report published in November 2007 by the Fiscal Policy Institute (a

private non-profit organization that monitors and reports on New York's tax and public service systems), the use of ITINs in New York state doubled between 2002 and 2003, from 44,000 to 99,000. The same report cites an I.R.S. estimate that of the 130 million individual income tax returns filed nationally each year, about six million are filed by undocumented workers.

#### **Facing difficult choices**

While it's impossible to know how many of Port Chester's undocumented workers are paying into the U.S. tax system, immigration advocates insist that those who come to this country generally perform the labor that no one else will. If the economic crisis prompts others to take on this work, they might go elsewhere.

"This is a volatile population that's used to surviving," said Heymann. "They're here to earn a living for their families. They'll go where the jobs are."

For Segundo Pucha, who arrived in Port Chester just three months ago after a 60-day trek from Ecuador, the few days' work he's found since arriving has not earned him enough money to send any back to his mother, who cares for Pucha's three young sons.

"I'm planning on giving it a few more months," he said, before heading into the Don Bosco Community Center for lunch.



**A group of laborers waits for work in the freezing rain outside  
the Don Bosco Hiring Site on Wednesday.**

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