

Immigrants reach out, touch home through long-distance phone shops

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Body

Popping up around metro Atlanta in Latino neighborhoods, long-distance phoning centers have rows of phone booths offering overseas phone calls. These casetas de larga distancia (long-distance booths) help immigrants stay in touch with families back home.

"This kind of business - it's growing," said Jaifer J. Blanco, director of a phone-booth business in Doraville. "[Immigrants] come here to work and they don't have credit - they can't get a phone. So they come to us to call Mexico, Honduras and South America."

At least five metro businesses around Atlanta offer long-distance booths, usually at rates comparable to in-home phone service. Indy Communications Inc. was apparently the first, opening up two shops along Cobb Parkway and in Chamblee in the last seven months.

The Indy centers feature a dozen wooden phone booths along a side wall.

"Casetas" are common in Latin American nations, said Carrie Blanco-Ogourousis, a worker at International Services, which opened last month in Doraville. Also, the customers prize the fact that center employees can speak Spanish.

"Casetas" centers give the customers a receipt, showing the rate and number of minutes, adding to the customers' comfort zone.

"When you call [at conventional pay phones], you have to keep putting in money. That's really uncomfortable," said Blanco-Ogourousis.

The booth center owners and managers say using the booths is a natural phase newcomers eventually grow out of as they become more established in this country.

Although booth centers have higher rates than home-phones for many calls, their rates are often slightly lower than residential rates for Latin American calls. Moreover, booth-center managers point out that their customers don't pay for home-phone purchase, connection or monthly service.

On a per-minute basis, Indy Communications this week advertised rates of 25 cents within the United States, 99 cents to Mexico and about \$ 1.29 to most other Latino countries.

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