

Outreach Runs Into Neighborhood Outrage;
Montgomery's Efforts to Help Day Laborers Cause Resentment

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Byline: Louis Aguilar, Washington Post Staff Writer

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Body

Montgomery County's decision to open an employment center for Latino **day laborers** in Silver Spring has sparked a fierce debate over the extent to which local government should **help** immigrants, especially those who are in the country illegally.

Opponents contend that Montgomery is improperly spending public funds by opening the center in an area where about a third of the Latino workers are undocumented. The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service in Baltimore reports that in recent weeks, people have been calling the agency to request a raid on the Silver Spring site -- a request the INS so far has ignored.

Supporters of the program counter that Montgomery, which has become a magnet for Latino immigrants in the last 10 years, cannot afford to ignore one of the poorest segments of its population.

The 1990 Census counted 54,327 Latinos in Montgomery, the largest concentration in any jurisdiction in the Washington area and about 7 percent of the county population.

The Census Bureau counted about 31,000 Latinos in the District, 29,000 in Prince George's County and 51,000 in Fairfax County.

Many Montgomery Latinos are recent immigrants, and many live in the county's southeastern corner, an area that continues to attract Latino newcomers.

"These are truly some of the neediest people in our community," said Charles Short, **Montgomery's** secretary of health and human services. "Whether they are legal or illegal is not the question. They still have the right to work."

County and INS officials say it's a violation of federal immigration law to hire undocumented immigrants, but the penalty is imposed on employers, not the people they hire. Immigrants, if arrested for being undocumented, often obtain temporary work permits from the INS while they await an immigration hearing, INS officials said.

The backdrop for the rising tension is the corner of University Boulevard East and Piney Branch Road, where Latino immigrants have gathered in the parking lot of a 7-Eleven store for more than a decade, hoping to get picked up by an employer who needs unskilled labor. For just as long, local residents and businesses have complained that the site is contributing to the decline of the working-class community around it.

The 7-Eleven parking lot draws the Latino **laborers** partly because many live in nearby apartments and partly because contractors often stop in the small shopping center next door to buy paint. The immigrants usually begin to arrive before dawn, and by sunrise, more than 100 are spread out through the huge parking lot.

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Some come from neighboring Prince George's County and the District. A few are African American, but most are Latinos. At least a third on any given day are undocumented, county officials said.

When a potential employer drives up, the men swarm the vehicle and sometimes try to jump inside before it fully stops. There is the clamor of heavily accented English as the men try to bargain and plead for work: "I work hard!" "Hey, man, you remember me?"

Always, there are more men than jobs, and it's that surplus of loitering men that angers neighbors. By midday, some are drunk and others are pitching pennies. The Clifton Baptist Church, on the west end of the parking lot, has complained that the men verbally harass women of the congregation. The owners of Fontana's Bowlarama, a duckpin bowling center across the street, say their business has been "devastated."

"They just tend to scare customers away simply because they are a large gathering of men," said co-owner John Fontana.

The long-simmering tension reached a boiling point a little more than a month ago when Robert Denny, a community activist from Bethesda, wrote a column in the Montgomery Journal that said the county's involvement in the Silver Spring site was "folly" and accused the county of "aiding and abetting . . . criminal activity."

Denny was angry that Montgomery, in an effort to move the laborers away from the parking lot, spent \$ 300,000 from a federal block grant last year to buy a one-story house on University Boulevard. Prince George's County gave \$ 100,000 in federal funds to renovate the house, which is a block away from the 7-Eleven store. The house is to become a permanent employment and training center for the immigrants, mainly Salvadorans and Guatemalans.

The county is spending an additional \$ 20,000 a year in federal funds to have a county worker on the new site assist the immigrants. And Montgomery awarded \$ 57,000 in county funds to CASA de Maryland, a Takoma Park-based group that has been helping laborers at the site for two years.

Denny's column prompted a stream of letters to the editor of the Montgomery Journal from area residents, county politicians and immigration reform advocates in Washington.

Supporters of the county program accused opponents of racism and of taking an oversimplified view of the problem. Opponents countered that the east Silver Spring neighborhood is being ruined and that the county is taking advantage of loopholes in national immigration laws.

"They want to bring all of El Salvador to that corner," said east Silver Spring resident Daniel Houck, who has battled the county over the day laborer site for years.

"They are mocking the laws of immigration," Houck said. "They are ruining businesses here, and they don't care because most of the people here are middle-class and working-class. How long do you think that site would last if it was in Bethesda?"

Short, the Montgomery health and human services official, said critics have "a misconception [that] . . . these people would just go away" if the county didn't get involved.

"What I am reading and hearing from the other side are a lot of code words that tap into racial tensions," Short said. "They want more than the undocumented workers to go away."

A few people have tried to turn the debate into more than a war of words. The INS in Baltimore has fielded "a number" of calls in recent weeks from Montgomery residents who want the agency to raid the site, said Tom Perryman, a supervisory special agent.

The INS twice raided the site in 1990, resulting in 46 arrests of undocumented workers. The raids created a traffic nightmare at the busy intersection as the immigrants rushed into the street, causing one INS vehicle to get into a "minor fender bender," Perryman said.

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Perryman said the INS doesn't have enough agents to conduct such raids again. Even if the agency had enough personnel, he said, the arrests would prove futile because most of the undocumented workers would get temporary work permits while they awaited immigration hearings. Although it is against the law to hire an immigrant who lacks residency papers, INS officials said the penalties on employers -- up to \$ 2,000 for a first offense -- are rarely imposed.

Perryman said his office may look into whether the county is breaking the law by allowing undocumented workers to find jobs, but he doubts that is the case because the county doesn't match workers with employers. It is the employers' obligation to determine whether workers are documented, not the county's or CASA's.

County and CASA officials remain unwavering in their support of the Silver Spring center, contending that it is the best way to ease tensions between immigrants and other area residents and businesses.

"This is the only way we can get a handle on the situation out there," said Montgomery County Executive Neal Potter (D). "We are providing some assistance for the workers, and we are trying to get them away from the parking lot."

The county has been lending a hand unofficially at the site since a trailer donated by Montgomery College was set up in the parking lot in October 1991. Then, last August, the county bought a house a block away from the 7-Eleven store and moved the trailer behind the house.

In early December, Montgomery County employee Sergio Luna began working at the new site, trying to persuade the laborers to gather there, instead of at the 7-Eleven. The new site has attracted some of the men, but many still congregate at the convenience store.

Luna and CASA officials concede that the corner parking lot will never be cleared completely as long as employers continue to stop there. "If the employers want to not fill out our paperwork, then he will go to 7-Eleven," Luna said. "The workers will follow him there."

CASA plans to run job-training programs at the house, as well as English classes and other social assistance programs. Luna said he hopes more workers will use the center once they realize that it offers training and a chance to earn better wages.

But the critics are pressing on. Denny said he has received more than 50 calls of support since he wrote the column. "People are just beginning to realize how much of a drain these illegals will be on the whole system -- in the schools, in health issues," he said. "The site is just the tip of the iceberg."

Opponents of the county program say they are being unfairly accused of racism. "I don't want to be branded as an Hispanic hater," Fontana said. "I know most of those people there are honest men trying to find work. I am not really trying to blame them."

But Short, the county official, isn't buying it. "We are in a very dangerous place in Montgomery County history," Short warned. "We've gotten to be very diverse in the past 10 years, and at the same time, we are facing tougher economic times.

"This is one of the more blatant examples [of people trying] to fragment our community along those lines."

Correction

An article Sunday failed to provide the full context of a remark by Charles Short, Montgomery County's secretary of health and human services, that illegal immigrants have the right to work. He noted that once an illegal immigrant is arrested, federal authorities often grant a temporary permit allowing that person to work while awaiting a deportation hearing.

Correction-Date: January 25, 1994, Tuesday, Final Edition

Graphic

PHOTO, **DAY LABORERS**, HOPING FOR WORK, CROWD AROUND AN EMPLOYER'S TRUCK IN THE PARKING LOT OF A 7-ELEVEN IN SILVER SPRING. JUANA ARIAS

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