

NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT: BENSONHURST;

Trying to Get Day Workers Off the Street

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Body

For more than 15 years, scores of men have gathered daily along 18th Avenue in Bensonhurst, desperately waiting for trucks, vans or cars to pull up -- their drivers in search of unskilled laborers for low-paying jobs, often involving construction, moving or restaurant work.

But the day workers, mostly undocumented immigrants from Mexico and Central America, have never been met with open arms by the residents and merchants along 18th Avenue between Bay Ridge Avenue and 72d Street. They have complained that the workers are nuisances who litter and harass passers-by. Last year residents' complaints led to arrests and fines for loitering. (The police say they do not have specific arrest figures.)

"I don't want them in front of my store," said the owner of Caffè Dei Sagui, who would not give his name. "They're ruining my business. Nobody comes here anymore."

The local Assemblyman, Peter J. Abbate Jr., says he has met several times with community leaders about the situation. He says he has proposed several nonresidential blocks for the workers to gather, but advocates for the workers refused them.

Last week, in an effort to alleviate the tension, some advocates for the workers met with about 30 of them to discuss plans for a center, paid for with raffles and donations, where employers could go to hire workers.

Reynaldo Guerrero, executive director of the Center for Immigrants Rights in Manhattan, said the workers had been subjected to insults that in some instances had led to fights. A center, he said, might help.

Some workers voiced guarded optimism, at best. Such talk, they say, is all too familiar. "I feel it's a waste of time," said Ricardo Riviera, 22, of Guatemala. "We've been made promises before that were not kept."

The other day, about 60 men milled about at the gathering site. Only about 10 were hired. The work, while back-breaking, tends to pay slightly more than the minimum wage of \$4.25 an hour.

On the corner of 70th Street, a man pulled up in an old car and offered a job cleaning a restaurant kitchen. Several workers rushed to the car and negotiations began, with the man offering \$4 an hour. A few minutes later, he raised the ante to \$5. Most of the men refused; one accepted.

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Reynaldo Benitez, who left 10 children at home in Honduras, did not take the offer. His hope: a somewhat better job.

Mr. Benitez, 44, now living in Sunset Park, said he came to America about three years ago after walking through Mexico and sneaking into Texas. He said he used his life savings of \$200 for the bus ride to New York after hearing that jobs were plentiful here.

"My country is so poor," he said. "If I don't come here, how am I going to support my family? The work may not pay much but it's more than I have." GARRY PIERRE-PIERRE

Graphic

Photo: Migrant workers who gather along 18th Avenue in Bensonhurst have long drawn complaints from residents and merchants. (John Sotomayor/The New York Times)

Map of Bensonhurst showing location of the day-workers gathering site.

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