

A NATION CHALLENGED: THE IMMIGRANTS; Testing The System Of Relief

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Body

They are among the legions of Lower Manhattan jobless -- the three Peruvians who used to clean apartments at Battery Park City, the Mexican cook from the concourse under the trade center, the pizza delivery man who whisked large pizzas up and down the towers.

Those workers, among hundreds who stream into the offices of Asociacion Tepeyac day after day, are among those who worked off the books. They have no Social Security numbers. Most lack a driver's license. They have no pay stubs; they were paid in cash.

As a result, they have had a thornier trip through the maze of disaster relief than most have. For those who worked off the books, seeking relief can mean openly declaring their illegal immigration status. And they must deal with relief workers, who, constantly on guard for hustlers, require some documentation.

Vast confusion has reigned at relief centers across the city, immigrants' advocates say. Sometimes, they say, relief workers are unaware of what kinds of benefits are available for illegal immigrants, and what kinds of documents they need to bring. Sometimes, those who lack documents simply walk out the door when they are asked to furnish a Social Security number; in some cases, they do not actually need one. In the most dire cases, the families of illegal immigrants who are missing have been unable to obtain a letter from an employer.

The executive director of the New York Immigration Coalition, Margie McHugh, said, "It's practically inevitable where we would have this problem -- where volunteer workers don't have enough of the technical information they need to help people with cases complicated by facts such as immigration status."

Some immigrants' advocates have called on federal officials to grant amnesty to the families of the dead. Speaking to a church full of his compatriots yesterday afternoon, President Vicente Fox of Mexico gave a nod to those demands. He told the crowd that the "bilateral agenda" of legalizing Mexican immigrants would resume as soon as possible.

Part of the confusion stems from a patchwork of relief. Funds from the State Crime Victims Board, state officials said, will be disbursed to families of the victims, including the injured, regardless of immigration status. They are also entitled to state-funded psychological counseling. But aid from the Federal Emergency Management Agency is not available to those here illegally.

At Tepeyac's offices the other night, Joel Magallan, a Jesuit who founded the group, circled the crowded room, doling out prepaid telephone cards and advice: tell the truth about your immigration status, try to get a letter from your former employer, apply for all the disaster aid you are entitled to.

For Josefina Mila, the housekeeper, for instance, doing that means soliciting affidavits from those whose homes she cleaned. (She cannot reach any of them by phone, nor can she cross the police lines to knock on their doors.)

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For Martin Andrade, 20, the pizza delivery man, it means proving how much he made, off the books, at a pizzeria: \$275 a week in cash, for 11-hour-shifts, 5 days a week, plus tips.

He has not been paid for his last week's work. Already, he has borrowed \$1,200 to pay rent and buy food. Every restaurant he goes to now, looking for work, they tell him they are firing, not hiring. "All my plans went down," he said.

He pulled out of his wallet a thick stack of trade center identification cards, one for each time he made a delivery. His most recent delivery was to Cantor Fitzgerald, on Sept. 4. Eerie and anachronistic, the cards are his best pieces of identification.

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Graphic

Photo: President Vicente Fox of Mexico paused yesterday beside notices for the missing while visiting St. Bernard's Church on West 14th Street. (Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times)

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