

Hotline to help day laborers turn in contractors who cheat; SANTA CRUZ POLICE SAY ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS DESERVE PROTECTION

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The city of **Santa Cruz**, which often takes controversial approaches to social issues, has now established what is believed to be the nation's first **hotline** for **day laborers** -- most of whom are undocumented -- to report unscrupulous employers.

The creation of the **hotline**, announced Monday, swiftly drew complaints from activists who **said** government should not offer such **protections** to **illegal immigrants**. ``The number of **illegal immigrants** is exploding, and this will only encourage more to come," **said** Yeh Ling-Ling, executive director of the Oakland-based Diversity Alliance for a Sustainable America.

But **police** officials, citing reports that employers regularly abuse **day laborers**, **said** everyone **deserves** the **protection** of the law.

``When **contractors** pay less than agreed-upon wages, or do not pay at all, they violate labor laws and subject honest **contractors** to unfair competition," **said Santa Cruz Police** Chief Howard Skerry, whose department joined forces with a Latino community service agency to set up the **hotline** at (831) 420-5997.

The 24-hour automated **hotline** will allow workers to record their complaint, with the option of leaving their name, phone number or contact information. Skerry **said police** immediately will **turn** over the names of **contractors**, vehicle plate numbers, telephone numbers and other information to the **Santa Cruz** County District Attorney's office for further investigation and possible civil and criminal prosecution.

Even when prosecutions of unscrupulous **contractors** are not possible because victims choose to remain anonymous, authorities will be able to identify those employers and warn them that **police** are watching, **police** officials **said** Monday.

Several **day laborers** waiting for work in front of **Santa Cruz's** San Lorenzo Lumber on Monday afternoon **said** they liked the idea of an anonymous **hotline** to report employers who try to **cheat** them. They all agreed that the main problem lies with **contractors**, and not individual homeowners who hire them for landscaping, painting and cleaning.

``The homeowners don't **cheat** you," **said** Juan Gaona, 33, of **Santa Cruz**. ``They feed us and treat us well. It's the greedy **contractors** that are the problem. A lot of workers don't get paid."

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On Monday, workers from **Santa Cruz**'s Familia Center, which worked with the **police** department to set up the **hotline**, began visiting **day laborer** sites to publicize the new program.

The **hotline** was born after a recent conversation between Yolanda Henry, executive director of the Familia Center and city Councilman Ryan Coonerty.

The two were discussing a proposed **Santa Cruz** ballot initiative that would raise the minimum wage in Surf City to \$9.25 -- \$2.50 higher than the state minimum. Henry pointed out that a larger problem for many members of the Latino community was ``getting paid at all" for work, and they agreed a **hotline** would be a good solution.

They also agreed that **illegal immigrants** would be less reluctant to call if they knew that the program was affiliated with the well-known, 22-year-old Familia Center, and not just the **police** department. The **hotline** will be checked regularly by **police**.

Coonerty took the proposal to the **police**, who researched it and found that no other **police** agency in the country had such a **hotline**. Among the big cities contacted were San Jose, San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego, El Paso, Tex., and Phoenix, Ariz., according to detective Arnold Vasquez and administrative analyst Zach Friend.

In late January, researchers from UCLA, the University of Illinois and New School University in New York released the results of an 18-month groundbreaking study that found that **day laborers** regularly encounter abuse, dangerous workplaces and theft of wages.

Researchers interviewed 2,660 workers at 264 hiring sites in 20 states and Washington, D.C., including 14 worker sites in San Jose, one in Mountain View and several in San Francisco, Oakland and Berkeley. Some sites were informal gathering spots on busy streets or in front of home-improvement centers; others were organized **day**-worker centers.

The study found that three-quarters of the workers are undocumented -- and that 87 percent are from Mexico and Central America. Almost half of all **day laborers** experienced at least one instance of ``wage theft" in the two months before being surveyed. Forty-four percent **said** they were denied food and water or breaks while on the job.

Gabriel Martinez, 45, of Watsonville, **said** he depends on the income from the casual labor market to supplement seasonal work in the strawberry fields. But he's always wary of potential employers -- particularly after he got **cheated** out of a **day**'s pay by someone who hired him to deliver advertising circulars.

After that experience, he **said**, he started copying down the license plates of employers. He **said** he'd have no reluctance contacting the **police hotline**, even though he is an undocumented **immigrant**.

Sixteen percent of the **day laborers** in the national study had reported being ``insulted" by **police** as they tried to seek work. Nine percent **said** they had been arrested.

But the workers interviewed Monday **said** that besides being chased off private property at the request of San Lorenzo Lumber's owners, they had no problems with the way they were treated by **Santa Cruz police**.

``I'll report the people who don't pay," Martinez **said** in Spanish. ``I have no problem with that."

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