

## **Farmingville's Rock and Hard Place**

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### **Body**

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IF there were a public-policy superhero on the landscape -- one who could stem illegal immigration, create affordable housing in the suburbs, raise the minimum wage, end global economic displacements, guarantee liberty and justice for all and assure that lawns were mowed and beans were picked at reasonable rates -- there would be no trouble in Farmingville today.

But Farmingville exists in the real world, where problems of all kinds tend to collide, overlap and linger unaddressed, until someone comes along and attacks one of them, forgetting it is connected to the others -- often thereby creating a whole new problem.

By some accounts, that is what happened a week ago when the Suffolk County executive, Steve Levy, ordered his police department to join forces with the Town of Brookhaven building inspectors in shutting down an illegal rooming house. The raid resulted in the arrest of a landlord and the displacement of about 60 men, all or most of them illegal immigrants who work as day laborers.

Advocates for the workers assailed Mr. Levy for what they called an unnecessarily harsh assault that pushed 60 people in precarious circumstances into homelessness.

But neighbors applauded Mr. Levy's boldness in attacking a problem that they had been asking public officials to do something -- anything -- about for a long time: migrants from Mexico and Central America who mass at street corners each morning seeking a day's work, living in overcrowded and unsightly homes next door to them.

"They bought a house with a white picket fence, so their kids could have good schools and enjoy the American dream," Mr. Levy said of those neighbors, many of whom he first met when he served as the state assemblyman from the Farmingville area. "Having 30 people in a flophouse next door was not part of the arrangement. They didn't sign up for this."

According to this view, the problem in such cases is not one of migrants per se, but of property rights and building codes. "If the flophouse was inhabited by 60 Caucasians, or college kids, we would have done the same thing," Mr. Levy said, referring to the raid on June 20.

But as other officials from New York to California know well, a decades-long influx of Latino immigrants, many of them in the country illegally, and a national immigration policy that varies between neglectful accommodation and harsh enforcement have left local officials like Mr. Levy holding a Rubik's cube of public policy problems.

At every turn, these officials find themselves out of alignment with one or another mission of government. For example, police officers who try to forge relationships with people in immigrant communities find that those sources dry up when there is any whiff of federal immigration surveillance. Building and health inspectors face similar suspicions when they try to gain access to rooming houses.

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Shutting down a rooming house may put a large number of people on the street, as happened in Farmingville. But federal laws forbid the use of social-services money to aid illegal immigrants, so local officials who want to help relocate the displaced must do so at arm's length, usually by enlisting charities and nonprofit groups.

Citizens tend to see what results as stasis. "People stand up at meetings and say, 'The town is not doing anything!'" said Jon Kaiman, the North Hempstead supervisor, who frequently receives complaints about overcrowded rooming houses in New Cassel or Port Washington or Carle Place. "The truth is, we are doing a lot, but it's a slow process."

Pressure from homeowners' groups may be speeding it up. Town and county officials said the Farmingville raid was the first of as many as 117 planned closures in Suffolk. North Hempstead is seeking injunctions against several operators of flophouses, too.

"People are angrier and angrier," Mr. Kaiman said. "We have to show that we are doing something."

That something may prove to be a bit gentler, at least initially, than it was in Farmingville. Mr. Kaiman says he has already lined up charitable groups to help in the event of any future raids and closures in North Hempstead. And after taking a public drubbing over his county's tactics, Mr. Levy said Tuesday that future raids in Suffolk would probably also be accompanied by similar social-service efforts.

But these are matters of style rather than substance. The options are pretty much the same for officials here and across the country, and those options are few.

"We have many of the same problems that you see on Long Island, and New Jersey and Atlanta and Kansas City," said Maria Giuriato, a city councilwoman in Salinas, Calif., where farms attract large numbers of migrant workers.

"Mexicans are fleeing by the thousands and thousands -- in Oaxaca, for instance, the coffee growers are suffering from competition from Nafta," Ms. Giuriato said, referring to the North American Free Trade Agreement. "There are whole towns without men in them. They all come here, and there is not enough affordable housing. Wages are too low. Workers are forced to live in very bad conditions."

Besides sitting on the Salinas city council, Ms. Giuriato also serves as the community relations director for the Department of Social and Employment Services in Monterey County.

When flophouses are closed in Salinas, inspectors and police officers hand out calling cards for agencies like the Monterey County Housing Advocacy Council, a private group that helps relocate anyone, no questions asked.

"They recently shut down a storefront where 30 men were stacked like cordwood," said Marilyn Dorman, the council's executive director. "Some of them trickled in here looking for help. Most of them didn't. There is a wariness of anything that looks official."

Advocates on Long Island were incensed when even such token aid was not forthcoming in Farmingville. "So now where do these people go? That is the question," said the Rev. Allan Ramirez, pastor of the Brookville Reformed Church and an advocate for Latino workers on Long Island. "What is the benefit to the community of putting people out on the street? There is none."

Advocates like Mr. Ramirez and Xochitl Castaneda, the coordinator of the Institute of Mexicans Abroad at the University of California, in Berkeley, argue that immigrants, legal or illegal, contribute in a major way to the local and national economy and do not deserve to be treated as quasi-criminals.

"Undocumented workers add \$120 billion a year to the national economy and pay between \$25 billion and \$30 billion in taxes," said Ms. Castaneda. "They receive no benefit from those taxes. They are denied access to health care, government assistance or the civil protections of the law."

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The anonymity of the immigrants' lives, in most cases a purposeful blending-in, makes their occasional surfacing on the front pages all the more startling -- whether as victims of a 2000 attack in Farmingville by white supremacists, or under the glare of television cameras trained on the dilapidated house where 64 men are said to have lived in 900 square feet of space.

But beneath the surface of that virtual invisibility -- an invisibility that enshrouds them even as they cut grass and blow leaves, bus tables, paint houses, lay bricks, dig ditches, haul asbestos, strip roofs, pour blacktop -- the emotions evoked by the day laborers are strong.

One neighborhood advocate in Farmingville calls them terrorists. Murky "patriot" groups from the Far West have organized marches to denounce them.

Mr. Ramirez, the advocate, said that Mr. Levy's raid amounted to "ethnic cleansing," a remark that prompted Mr. Levy to fire the phrase "lunatic fringe" at Mr. Ramirez, who responded in an interview by calling Mr. Levy evil.

"We have helped to close down a place where men were living in concentration-camp-like conditions," Mr. Levy said Tuesday. "If there were a fire in that house, and people died, the same people who attack me for closing it would be attacking me" for not having closed it, he said.

As for the emotions of the immigrants themselves, leery as they are of newspaper reporters as well as building inspectors, the record is incomplete but emerging piecemeal. The Bi-National Health Task Force, a joint group of researchers from Mexico and the United States, found in one recent study that after diabetes and hypertension, the most common health problem among Latino immigrant workers was depression.

"They are away from their families for long periods, and they are living in crowded conditions with no access to health care," said Ms. Giuriato of Salinas, a member of the 30-member task force. "After 10 years of this, the predominant experience is depression."

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## Graphic

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Photos: After an illegal rooming house in Farmingville was shut and its 60 residents displaced, protesters demanded a meeting with Steve Levy, county executive. (Photo by Kirk Condyles for The New York Times)

(Photo by Barton Silverman/The New York Times)(pg. 1)

Carrying away belongings from the Farmingville rooming house. (Photo by Barton Silverman/The New York Times)(pg. 7)

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