

Emphasizing the No Hassle in 'No-Hassle Zones'

The New York Times

November 26, 2006 Sunday, Late Edition - Final

Copyright 2006 The New York Times Company

Section: Section 14CN; Column 3; Connecticut Weekly Desk; Pg. 1

Length: 826 words

Byline: By GERRI HIRSHEY

E-mail: conn@nytimes.com

Dateline: STAMFORD

Body

TORRENTIAL rains have reduced the customary crowd of about 50 day laborers waiting for work under the I-95 viaduct on State Street to just a clutch of shivering sodden men. Here in the pickup area that city signs designate the "**No Hassle Zone**" for hiring, **no** contractors' trucks cruise by.

"If they are lucky, many of them will work just two days a week," says the Rev. Juan David Paniagua, the 32-year-old Colombian-born pastor of the Stamford Spanish Second Church of the Nazarene.

Unlike these men -- most are undocumented immigrants from Central and South America -- Mr. Paniagua arrived at his assigned church from Bogota with proper papers and his family (a wife and two children) intact. Now he does pastoring of a different sort as a part-time outreach worker for the East Side Partnership here. This association of local residents and business owners hired him to tackle the dicey, sometimes contentious relationship between the men, who can number in the hundreds during the summer, and the community within the main hiring corridor along East Main.

On behalf of local merchants dismayed by men milling outside their businesses, Mr. Paniagua asks contractors not to pick up workers outside the designated **zone**, especially the Dunkin' Donuts on East Main. He urges the laborers not to rush the trucks, to keep the **zone** clean and stay there. But it's tough to herd this skittish flock that senses the wolf at the door.

"They are just trying to survive," Mr. Paniagua says. Some days, his job requires the agility and tenacity of a border collie.

In the partnership's tiny Myrtle Avenue office, Mr. Paniagua explains his mission: "The purpose of my work is to give these people some voice. Most of them are afraid about filing a claim or calling the boss, the contractor, to ask for payment."

Among the undocumented, he explains, fear is the greatest ally of exploitation -- a condition borne out by the first nationwide study of day laborers in 2005, which found that nearly half of day laborers at 500 hiring sites reported being cheated out of wages. In Stamford, according to Mr. Paniagua's own study of about 60 workers, 65 percent report being cheated; 10 percent had been abandoned at a workplace by an employer; nearly 30 percent say they were denied food and water breaks; and 20 percent were injured on the job. Less than half of the injured received medical care.

Emphasizing the No Hassle in 'No-Hassle Zones'

"I have seen some terrible stories here," Mr. Paniagua says. He cites the man who came looking for work just days after doctors had reconstructed a finger mangled and flayed by a machine. Another, with his left arm in a cast, was trying to work two weeks after an accident that had crushed his shoulder and collarbone.

Sandra Ramos overcame her fear to let Mr. Paniagua file complaints with the State Department of Labor on behalf of her and a co-worker against a local cleaning service that paid them \$275 a week, but demanded that they work 84 to 90 hours a week -- over six days.

"That had them working for less than half minimum wage," Mr. Paniagua said. (Connecticut's minimum hourly wage is \$7.40 and goes to \$7.65 on Jan. 1.) "But it took Sandra months to quit that because she has four children to feed in Guatemala."

The women's claims, under investigation, are Mr. Paniagua's first filing with the labor department. Often when phone calls to contractors do not elicit payment, he resorts to small claims court. "But sometimes even when we get judgments, some refuse to pay," he says.

Carmen Domonkos, project manager for the citywide Stamford Partnership, who hired Mr. Paniagua, says his victories echo loudly: "Juan is quiet and low key, but the laborers and the business people have come to trust him. Once he helped two or three guys get paid, it went a long way toward building confidence."

Last month, Mr. Paniagua was glad to get some advice from members of the Los Angeles-based National Day Labor Organizing Network, which signed an agreement in August with the A.F.L.-C.I.O. to work at improving wages and health care for workers. With the Census Bureau classifying Connecticut as a "destination" state for immigrants -- they will spend \$3 billion in the state this year and send \$300 million home -- Mr. Paniagua acknowledges that day laborer issues will require solutions brokered in Hartford and Washington.

But right now, he has a very specific problem with his little island in the stream. "Dunkin' Donuts is moving two blocks north on East Main," he says gloomily, meaning it will be harder to keep the workers in the zone.

Back at the dripping, disconsolate No Hassle Zone, no one will promise that they won't try to follow the bosses to the shop as the slow winter season closes in. No one is inclined to give a full name to a reporter. But a man with bandaged fingers calling himself Ernesto is willing to translate the consensus on Mr. Paniagua and his work among them: "One good man. Many, many problems."

<http://www.nytimes.com>

Graphic

Photo: PARTNERS -- The Rev. Juan David Paniagua, center, with day laborers in Stamford. (Photo by Janet Durrans for The New York Times)

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Emphasizing the No Hassle in 'No-Hassle Zones'

Subject: OCCUPATIONAL ILLNESS & INJURY (78%); RECRUITMENT & HIRING (78%); WAGES & SALARIES (73%); WEATHER (73%); IMMIGRATION (69%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (69%); ASSOCIATIONS & ORGANIZATIONS (67%); DOGS (62%); WOUNDS & INJURIES (62%)

Company: DUNKIN' BRANDS GROUP INC (67%)

Organization: East Side Partnership (Stamford, Conn)

Ticker: DNKN (NASDAQ) (67%)

Person: Gerri Hirshey; Juan David (Rev) Paniagua

Geographic: BOGOTA, COLOMBIA (57%); COLOMBIA (79%); SOUTH AMERICA (77%); Stamford (Conn)

Load-Date: November 26, 2006

End of Document