

Immigrant Services Envisioned For Enclave; Md. Community's Needs Long Neglected, Some Say

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Body

Charles Short stood in a field of balding grass, squinting into the sun -- and the future.

To his left, near the low-rise, low-rent apartments where many of Langley Park's residents live, was the land where his employer, the Catholic Archdiocese of Washington, intends to build a two-story medical clinic. Beyond that, along the chain-link fence lined with crushed beer cans, was where the youth services building will go. And to his right, the abandoned brick building that gang members keep spraying with graffiti will be razed to make way for a gym and a 600-seat chapel.

"If you can just stretch your imagination, you can see that it will be like a village center, like a downtown for social services," said Short, the secretary for social concerns for the archdiocese.

The archdiocese's project, the Mother Teresa Center, is at the heart of an ambitious plan by nonprofit groups that have long assisted immigrants elsewhere in the Washington area to create a hub of service agencies in Langley Park, an immigrant enclave on the border of Prince George's and Montgomery counties.

In addition to the project on Merrimac Drive -- the center is due to open in two years at the soonest, officials said -- Montgomery-based CASA de Maryland is working to establish an employment training and legal aid center in a boarded-up mansion a half-block away. The District-based Latin American Youth Center, which would run tutoring and mentoring programs out of the archdiocese's planned youth services building, also hopes to open a smaller office in Langley Park as soon as this spring.

The initiative marks a milestone in Prince George's history. Until recently, the county was known for its decades-long transformation from a majority-white to a majority-black population and its emergence as a magnet for affluent African Americans. But the county's Latino population rose during the 1990s and stood at 7 percent of the population by 2000. More recent census estimates put that figure at 9 percent.

Langley Park, a sprawling zone of modest houses and garden apartment complexes, has been the entry point for many newcomers, most of whom are immigrants. According to the 2000 Census, 64 percent of Langley Park's residents are Latino and 17 percent have incomes below the poverty line.

Many of them receive care at a large county health center in nearby Cheverly.

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Immigrant advocates, however, have **said** that the **needs** of residents have been **neglected** for years because of the **community's** proximity to Silver Spring in Montgomery County, which has an even larger Latino population.

"This **community** has been caught in this question of, are they in Prince George's or are they in Montgomery County, and which jurisdiction should take responsibility," **said** Lori Kaplan, head of the Latin American Youth Center. "Meanwhile, there are thousands of kids and families who are very low income and not a lot of the infrastructure and support **services** we have in D.C. . . . The **need** there is just tremendous."

Gustavo Torres, president of CASA de **Maryland**, credits Prince George's County Executive Jack B. Johnson (D) with helping to break the impasse. Torres' organization, based in Silver Spring just blocks from the Langley Park border, considered opening a branch in Prince George's eight years ago. "Almost half of the **services** we provide are to residents from Prince George's," Torres **said**.

CASA de **Maryland** also has **long** wanted to open a hiring hall -- separate from its employment center -- for laborers who gather to wait for work at University Boulevard and New Hampshire Avenue in Langley Park, to the consternation of many area businesses.

But Torres **said** his organization was deterred by a rocky relationship with former Prince George's county executive Wayne K. Curry (D). Johnson, by contrast, made overtures to the Latino **community** within weeks of his election in November 2002 -- including appointing a Hispanic liaison, William Campos. Last week, Campos won the Democratic Party's nomination to the County Council seat vacated by Peter A. Shapiro, representing the area that includes Langley Park.

Encouraged by such developments and by the support of Shapiro, CASA de **Maryland** has been negotiating with the owner of a large complex of apartment buildings in Langley Park, Sawyer Realty Holdings, to lease the mansion, on a sprawling lawn in the center of that complex.

Even if a deal is reached, some hurdles will remain, including the yet-undetermined cost of renovating the mansion. CASA de **Maryland** estimates it will **need** \$425,000 annually to operate the center, but Torres **said** that the group has secured commitments of \$40,000 from private foundations and that it will ask Prince George's County for assistance.

Sawyer Realty has agreed to effectively donate to the archdiocese three acres a half-block from the mansion. And Short **said** the church has lined up a builder and raised \$6 million of the \$12 million **needed** to build the center it **envisions**.

If all the plans go forward, Short predicted, Langley Park could become a national model. "Years ago," he **said**, "people saw this place as a helpless morass of human suffering and political confusion. Now I'm hoping that people will see this as a place of leadership."

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