

Alexandria-Arlington

EXTRA

THURSDAY, APRIL 17, 2008



BY LEAH L. JONES FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

David Benavides, the office manager at the Shirlington Employment and Education Center, listens as clients discuss some of the problems they face, including stress from a shortage of work.

'Many Are Losing Hope'

Faced with unemployment, depression and substance abuse, immigrants need counseling to deal with the economic downturn. Arlington's day labor center is there to help.

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Arlington Center Offers Hope in Hard Times

Immigrants Find Support, Counseling to Weather Downturn

By BRIGID SCHULTE
Washington Post Staff Writer

In Prince William County, immigrant communities are unraveling as foreclosures, a weak economy, a police crackdown and harsh policies to deny services to illegal immigrants kick in. In Herndon, a day labor center became such a lightning rod in the national debate about illegal immigrants that residents elected leaders who shut it down 21 months after it opened.

In Richmond, lawmakers this session pushed 130 bills, most of which failed, that would make life harder for illegal immigrants. And the record number of deportations across the United States last year, 282,000, was more than double the number from 2001.

But things are different in Arlington County.

In Arlington, where officials unanimously approved a resolution last fall welcoming all immigrants, regardless of their status, a day labor center has operated without much fanfare for eight years. And now, even in a budget crunch, officials are asking for mental health counseling for immigrant workers. And they're getting it.

"Things have gotten really bad for day laborers. Many have lost their houses, their places of work. Many are exploited and not paid. And they have no way to make things better," county mental health counselor Fernando Peñaflorera said in Spanish.

For the past month, Peñaflorera has met every Wednesday with day laborers to talk about stress, anxiety, depression and substance abuse.

"Alcohol is the easiest answer for many of them," he said. "Wherever you go, there is a 7-Eleven, and you can buy a six-pack. The situation is serious. Many are losing hope."

The request for counseling came from Andres Tobar, executive director of the Shirlington Employment and Education Center, just off Four Mile Run.

"In the last couple years, we've had a more than 50 percent drop in jobs," he told the County Board at a budget hearing. "Where we might have had 500 jobs a month, now we're down to 230, maybe 200. We saw able men looking for work and able to meet their needs. Today, we're finding them scraping and not able to meet the rent."

Many have become homeless, he said.

One recent, dreary day, men in baseball caps, paint-spattered sweat shirts and work boots milled about outside the center. Some waited in the covered shelter outside, where they scanned the streets for any people who might drive by and ask for workers for the day.

"Work?" the laborers eagerly asked every passerby. "You got work?"

Inside, men sat around talking or surfing the Internet on one of the center's two computers, looking for news about El Salvador. Others crowded into the conference room to watch a Spanish movie on television. Many absently fingered the ID cards the center makes for them for \$5, showing their names, date of birth, address and work expertise.

"We need to keep them from getting bored," Tobar said.

The men have English-language training, job training classes and other programs. With so little work, the days are long. Tobar called a meeting and asked how the workers were faring. They agreed to talk about their lives on the condition that only their first names be used, as many are not in the country legally.

A man named Ramiro, wearing a

blue baseball cap emblazoned with a U.S. flag, handed out his handyman card.

"There's no work," he said in Spanish. The 52-year-old hasn't worked in two months. He has six children in Bolivia who are all in college. He left home five years ago to make enough money to get them through school. Now he has nothing to send.

"I wanted a good life for my children. But now, what can I do?" he asked.

Ramiro is considering returning home, in defeat, if he doesn't get work soon. But he doesn't know how he'll face his family.

One worker blamed the lack of work on the anti-immigrant mood in the country. "People are afraid to



"You can see it in their faces, the depression," said Andres Tobar, executive director of the Shirlington Employment and Education Center.



David Benavides, a former Marine who served in Iraq and is now the center's officer manager, said that as times have gotten rough for immigrants, he has seen tough workers curled up in a corner crying.

hire you if you don't have papers," he said.

He was quickly interrupted. "It doesn't matter if you have papers; there isn't work for anyone," another said.

Another worker, clearly drunk at 9:30 in the morning, was roundly criticized by the others. "If you get the job, you'll ruin it for the rest of us!" one said.

"Who would want to take a drunk to their house?" another scolded. "You'll do a bad job and then [employers] won't come back."

Another worker, Balthazar, 60, left to pick up food at the food bank next door. He explained how he left a municipal government job in Lima, Peru, eight years ago so his son could attend college in the United

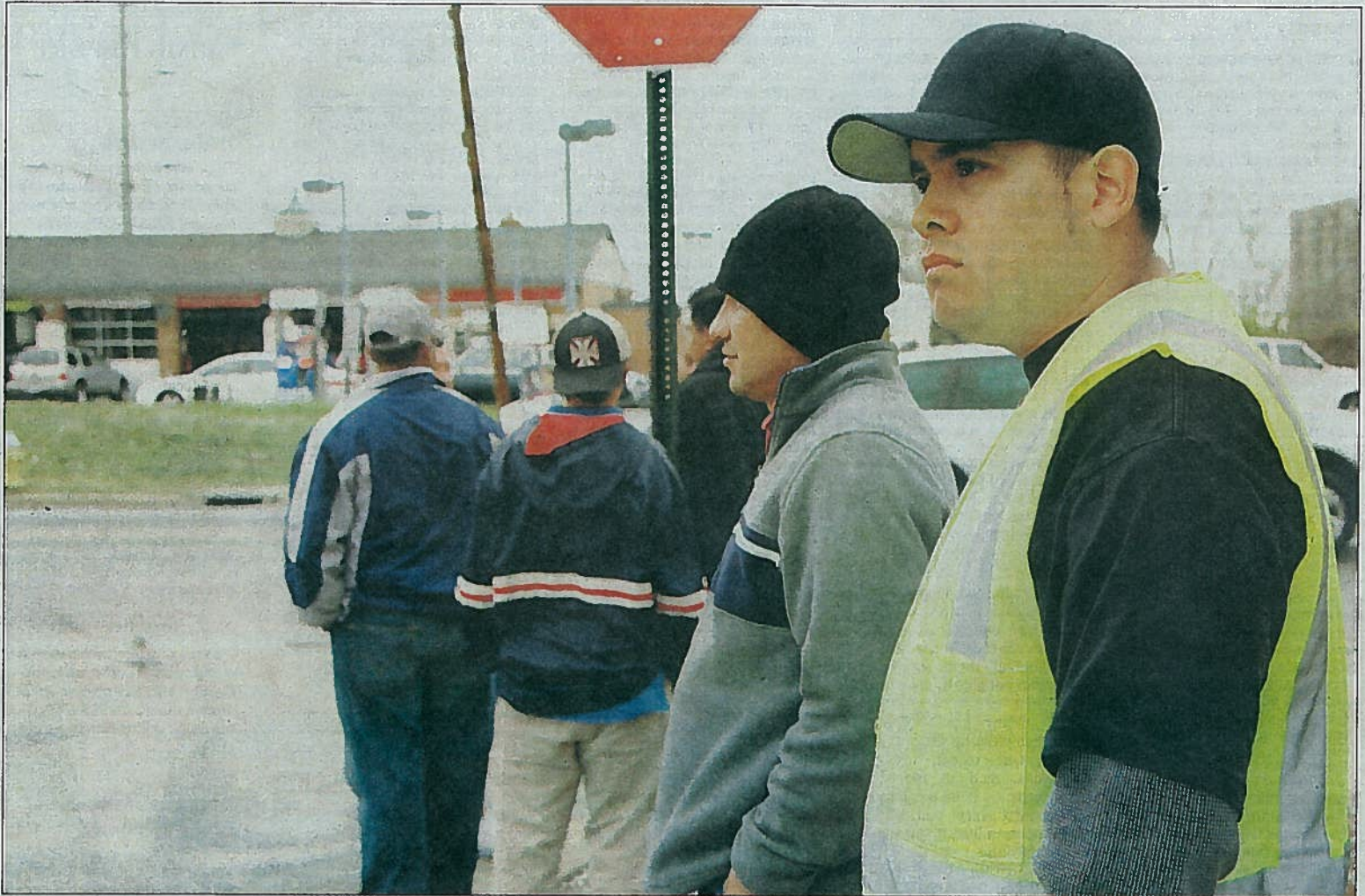
States.

For a few years, Balthazar worked six or seven days a week to make that happen. Now, he said, he will do anything for work: paint, lay bricks, hang drywall, mow, landscape. Anything. But there isn't any work. And his son has had to suspend his studies.

"I don't know if he can continue," Balthazar said. It's something he worries about constantly.

"Some people are depressed," he said. "It depends on the person. I want to keep fighting. My father was the kind of person who got up at 4 a.m. to work. I respect that. I work like that."

Tobar said he has become increasingly concerned about the mental state of the day laborers as



PHOTOS BY LEAH L. JONES FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Meivin Cabrera, above, stands with day laborers seeking work. Below, 4-month-old Kimberly Lopez visits the Shirlington Employment and Education Center, which helps immigrants and day laborers.

work has dried up. When one worker became so depressed recently that he swallowed rat poison and had to have his stomach pumped and another remarked that there was no point in trying any longer, Tobar said he had to act.

"You can see it in their faces, the depression," Tobar said. "I don't know what could occur with desperate people who are starving. But I do know that desperate people often take desperate measures."

This year, Tobar called the county's Department of Human Services and received help for mental health counseling. He was testifying recently in the hopes of keeping that counseling, as County Board members consider a proposal to cut as much as \$1 million in services, including substance abuse and mental health counseling, in Arlington's annual \$925 million budget. Tobar worries that, with positions being cut, the counselors will be stretched and will have less time to come to the center to work with the laborers. The board is scheduled to vote



on the final budget on Saturday.

County Board Chairman J. Walter Tejada (D) was an early supporter of the day labor center, for pragmatic and philosophical reasons.

"We have a history in Arlington of

being a caring, inclusive community that values diversity. And we support people who are here trying to improve the quality of their lives in our region through hard work," Tejada said. "There are people looking

for work and employers looking for workers. And if that activity takes place — and it will take place — the government needs to coordinate it so that it happens in some kind of orderly manner, that the needs and demands of work are met.

"We realize that this is a divisive issue in some places," he said, "but it does not need to be."

Although times are tight, Tejada said, the mental health of day laborers must be addressed to provide help to those who need it and to protect the community at large.

"Having a substance abuse counselor there is a proactive way of addressing the needs of the population. That's part of what a community needs to do. We need to take care of our neediest residents," Tejada said. "And ultimately, when people are able to find work, we all benefit."

Back at the center, officer manager David Benavides, a former Marine who served in Iraq, spent the morning calling employers who hadn't paid workers to get them to pay up.

The workers are friendly with one another, using nicknames such as Potato Face, Dracula, Gloves or Perro de Lengua, "Loose Tongue," because he gossips so much.

Benavides said that as times have gotten rough, he's seen tough workers curled up in a corner crying. Some people borrowed thousands of dollars to pay smugglers to get them into the country. And now that they can't pay their loans, the smugglers are harassing their families. "That's really tough for them," he said.

A worker who had lost his apartment and could no longer share custody of his children was ecstatic when he got a temporary job, Benavides said. He was showing off, inviting his friends for drinks.

But he drank so much that he passed out. And his friends stole his money. Now he's homeless.

"That's why we need a substance abuse counselor," Benavides said. "Going through these times is very tough. But alcohol only makes it worse."