

Labor Day: Shines Light on NY Workers With Fewest Protections

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NEW YORK - As New York heads into a long weekend to celebrate the contributions made by workers, local advocates say this Labor Day should shine a spotlight on local workers who have the least protections.

David Dyssegard Kallick, director of the Fiscal Policy Institute's Immigration Research Initiative, says immigrant day laborers are doing tough jobs and contributing to local economic growth, despite the fact that many work "under the table" in low-paying jobs with unsafe conditions.

In the ongoing debate over immigration, he says, these day laborers have been blamed for everything under the sun, with little concern for their welfare as workers.

"Instead of blaming day laborers, we should focus on pragmatic ways that day laborers could be paid fairly, and have safe and decent labor conditions. Labor Day is a great time to be taking a moment to think about how do we raise standards for all workers, and not just wind up demonizing some."

In communities such as Long Island, Kallick says, the debate often has gotten so heated and polarized that it's hard to craft workable solutions. On Labor Day, he says, he thinks all sides should at least be able to agree to the need to afford dignity to all workers in New York.

Long Island attorney Theo Marangus says she just won a settlement for an immigrant worker who fell off the roof at two different work sites where he was hired "under the table." Despite winning his case in court, Marangus says, that worker gave up on his dream of gaining legal status and remaining in the United States.

"Ended up with a rod in his leg, he went home really like a battered guy at 30 years old. It's sad that we allow our society to treat people so poorly, and to care so little about their safety and their well-being, but to use them to do the jobs that we don't want to have to do."

Marangus recently stepped up her efforts to help immigrant workers. She is now handling some civil actions for the nonprofit group CoLoKi, which operates a trailer for day laborers in Freeport.

More information is online at colokiinc.com.