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### Job Center Helps Immigrant Workers As They Await Reform

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Day laborers and staff in Bay Parkway Community Job Center. Picture: Theron Mohamed

When Victoriano de la Cruz hustled for construction work on Brooklyn’s streets, he earned \$60 a day. But since joining the Bay Parkway Community Job Center in Bensonhurst, he’s picked up skills and commands a wage of up to triple that amount, enough to build a new home in his native Mexico.

De la Cruz, 35, was one of a half-dozen immigrant day laborers at the job center on Monday. The red-and-yellow trailer on the edge of Gravesend Bay is run by the Workers’ Justice Project, a group advocating equal pay and rights for immigrant and low-wage workers. Its denizens are grateful for the structure and organization the center provides, but see nationwide legal action as key to foreign workers’ prosperity.

“I think it’s very important,” de la Cruz said. “Immigration reform could help guarantee a fair wage for immigrant workers, and make sure they work in safe conditions.”

The job center is a necessity for those who, like de la Cruz, lack many protections under the current system. With 40 percent of its labor force foreign born, according to the New York State Comptroller’s office, Brooklyn is on the front lines of the immigration reform debate. Without reform, experts say, immigrant workers may be exploited, and local economies might not benefit from their knowledge and work ethic. Companies will struggle to get visas for the higher-skilled foreign workers they seek. And if they can work legally, immigrants can enhance and expand their skills, potentially benefiting entire communities.

“The current immigration regulations need an overhaul and need to be brought into the 21st century,” said Hamel Vyas, director of international personnel at Mount Sinai Medical Center in Manhattan. Reform could allow the nation to grow and “give opportunity to all future Americans to live the American Dream,” she added.

Legislative changes could complement the gains that workers like de la Cruz have made so far. For the last three months, he has been cleaning out the basement and replacing the windows and door frames of a Rockaway Park home wrecked by Hurricane Sandy. He was hired at the job center, where day laborers can be recruited at wages ranging from \$120 for a general helper to \$180 for an electrician. Studying other workers has allowed de la Cruz to develop skills like tiling, and he now earns \$1,000 a week.

“There’s security here,” de la Cruz said. Since he began frequenting the job center a decade ago, he’s always been paid the wage promised. Earning a

steady income has allowed de la Cruz to save money, and he planned to begin building a \$15,000 home in Mexico this week, trusting his half-brother to oversee the project.



The Bay Parkway Community Job Center in Bensonhurst. Picture: Theron Mohamed

Without the protections offered by the job center, unscrupulous employers may take advantage of illegal immigrants. They sometimes underpay them, and those who become legal may lose their jobs because employers don't want to pay for the benefits required by law.

"They prefer to have undocumented workers because they pay them cash and don't have to worry," said Leticia Alanis, director of La Unión, a Brooklyn organization that promotes the social, cultural and economic rights of global south communities. One construction worker who received a green card was fired by his company when he asked for holidays and benefits, she said.

Immigration reform would hopefully mean stronger protection for foreign-born workers, Alanis said.

"People will be respected," she said. "We won't be treated like an object that you use and throw away. At the moment, people get sick and 'bye-bye'."

The job center offers wage guarantees and requires employers to provide their contact details, ensuring fair wages and accountability. Its other workers echoed de la Cruz's call for immigration reform, claiming that granting citizenship to illegal immigrants would make them more mobile and could reduce job competition with natives.

"You can go to Florida, Los Angeles, different states," said Luis Ubaldo, 52, who moved to the U.S. from Xalapa in Mexico 27 years ago. After a decade of farming watermelons and strawberries in Texas and Oregon, he was granted U.S. citizenship. "You have the freedom to work anywhere."

Equitable wages and safer work conditions should also be central to immigration reform, Ubaldo added.

Initiatives like the Bay Parkway job center may be pushing employers to pay higher wages, but a rising immigrant population could be a boon for local businesses.

"Immigrants are usually a lot more hard-working than people who were born here, that's for sure," said Jose Collao, 27, a U.S. native who works part-time at Sunset Car Care on Fourth Avenue in Sunset Park. Foreign-born workers are eager to make the most of the opportunity to work in the United States, he said, and higher wages keep them motivated. Collao estimated that a month's pay in Central America was \$140, and workers could make double that in a week in Brooklyn.

Immigrant workers who are members of the local population can also help businesses cater to their neighborhoods. Immigrants make up 50 percent of all the borough's small business owners, compared to 46 percent for the city as a whole.

"When a new immigrant group comes into the community, they have different demands," said Miriam Colon, director of Brooklyn's Small Business Development Center. "Business owners employ people in the community that speak the dialect, that are aware of the culture, and know what clothes or food the population needs."

Some opponents of immigration say foreign-born workers compete with natives for employment, but they may take undesirable jobs that Americans may not want.

"They're filling the gap for the people that don't want the job," Colon said. Certain industries or mom-and-pop businesses with small profits may not be able to pay enough to attract Americans, she explained.

Employers hoping to hire immigrants from overseas can be stymied by the current system, said Neena Dutta, an immigration attorney at Dutta Law Firm, P.C., in Lower Manhattan. Brooklyn's many small construction and food service businesses could be particularly affected.

"There isn't really a visa for people who don't hold a bachelor's degree," she said. Employers can also struggle to hire foreign workers for jobs like graphic design and architecture, professions that aren't listed as eligible for work visas.

Immigration reform could resolve these issues, and also benefit the national economy, if its 1986 incarnation is any indication.

"Immigrants who'd previously been undocumented were able to move to jobs suited to their abilities, invest in education, and increase their wages," said David Dyssegaard Kallick, a senior fellow at Fiscal Policy Institute. Reform would also create a more level playing field for employers of low-wage workers, he said, some of who lower their business costs by hiring undocumented workers.

But allowing immigrants to meet every demand of the labor market might not be the optimal solution.

"You want some pressure for wages and labor force participation to rise, and pressure to invest in education if there aren't enough architects or engineers, for example," Kallick said. "You need a balance."

Immigration reform is still a distant prospect for workers like de la Cruz, whereas the job center has always provided for him. Whether or not the government alters immigration laws, he plans to keep coming to the red-and-yellow trailer.

"It was too hard before," said de la Cruz. "My life is different now."

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