

**Original Article:**

**ANALYZING DAY LABOR FROM WITHIN:  
A CASE STUDY OF DAY LABOR CENTERS  
IN LOS ANGELES**

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**Abstract**

Traditionally, day labor centers give workers their own space, effectively getting them off the street while giving them access to a system that will support them and advocate for them. Despite the primarily good intentions of the centers, a gap exists between the needs of the workers and the greater purpose of the centers. This ethnographic study conducted at a day labor center in Los Angeles, found that day labor centers rarely address the priorities of the day laborers themselves. While day laborers would greatly benefit from organizing, it is a luxury many cannot afford, as they need steady, reliable employment. The centers need an infusion of new and creative ideas to bridge the gap between organizers and workers and create a space where workers find employment and access to important services.

**Keywords:** Immigration, Day labor, Community organizing,  
Labor markets, Employment, Immigrant rights

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## INTRODUCTION

Driving into the parking lot of a home improvement center in downtown Los Angeles a group of 25 people, mostly men, immediately surround you, fighting for your attention. In broken English, you hear shouts of “How many? How many do you need for your project? How many?” as the circle closes in tighter. The men try to prove their strength, their English skills, or whatever they think will get them the job, all within a few seconds of your arrival. The middle of that circle can be intimidating- how do you choose which laborers to hire? How do you know if they will work hard? Will the others be angry with you for making your decision? Or worse, what will they do when they find out you are not hiring? These workers, often times known as day laborers, vie for the attention from possible employers, hoping to secure a job in an unknown and ever changing job market.

Traditionally, day laborers seek temporary employment. They represent a difficult group to define and discussing the group becomes tricky, as there is no formal definition. Typically, scholars use the term to denote “a type of temporary employment that is distinguished by hazards in or undesirability of the work, the absence of fringe and other typical workplace benefits (i.e., breaks, safety equipment), and the daily search for employment,” (Valenzuela, 2003). The task of definition becomes especially difficult because of the informality and fluidity that characterize the market. In Los Angeles, these temporary workers are primarily Spanish speaking males, and, while there do exist organizations and places for them to congregate, many chose to go at the job search alone- relying on their own skill, placement on the sidewalk, and ultimately, luck to secure employment.

However, some day laborers choose to utilize day labor centers that have, in the last twenty years, begun to help them organize and find employment. While providing a safe space for workers to seek employment, these centers often do not have the resources to reach their full potential. Based on an ethnographic study of day labor centers in Los Angeles, this paper will examine the meanings attached to the centers by both workers and organizers. Originating as a grassroots, community-led initiative, day labor centers have evolved to favor a top-down organizational system, leaving behind the realities of the workers themselves. Academia has followed this pattern closely in its analysis of the centers, organizers, and societal structures, while abandoning discussion of those the centers claim to serve.

The terms “day labor centers” and “formal sites” are used to denote the places organized for the purpose of supporting the day laborers in their search for employment, while the terms “unauthorized” or “informal sites” will be used when discussing the spaces- usually on street corners, in parking lots, by parks or near home improvement stores- where workers seek employment without the assistance provided by the formal sites.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The day labor community as described above consists of a population, generally men, who are hired as temporary workers for both skilled and unskilled work, without the security of a steady job with expected wages, reliable hours, or protections for the worker. It is an unofficial understanding that the employers will not ask about their legal status in exchange for the compliance for the workers, regardless of the conditions. (Ebenshade & Toma, 2001; Fine, 2006; Smith, 2008; Valenzuela, 2003; Wakin, 2008). According to a nation wide study conducted in 2006, a majority of the population of day laborers (59%) are undocumented immigrants from Mexico, while 28% are from Central America. Many day laborers, 79% of the population, look for work on their own at informal or unauthorized centers, gathering on street corners and outside of businesses. The rest (21%) use day laborer centers as a resource to find work (Smith, 2008; Wakin, 2008). Due to their status as undocumented immigrants, the benefits of advocacy from a labor union are inaccessible, (Malpica, 2002). Theoretically, day laborer centers aim to help protect this population, vulnerable to exploitation, changes in labor demand, and injuries, as well as many other issues that plague this labor market (Malpica, 2002; Smith, 2008; Wakin, 2008). The centers become a space for organizing, advocacy, legitimizing the job market, and creating a community of solidarity in response to the division that normally characterizes the group fighting for the same few jobs (Fine, 2006; Valenzuela, 2004; Valenzuela, A, personal communication, June 25, 2010).

Many different organizations throughout the country work with day laborers. One organization, the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON) strives to fulfill the needs of the population through creating a network between the groups that work with day laborers. NDLON strives to “unify and strengthen its member organizations to be more strategic and effective in their efforts to develop leadership, mobilize day laborers in order to protect and expand their civil, labor, and human rights. NDLON fosters a safer, more humane environment for day laborers, both men and women, to earn a living, contribute to society, and to integrate into the community,” (NDLON, 2010).

In contrast to NDLON, many smaller organizations work at the grassroots levels. As noted by one of the many organizations that work with day laborers on a smaller scale, these centers strive to form communities, protect the rights of the workers, provide an educational space, and ultimately “engage in community development.”<sup>1</sup> A strong sense of community and trust- between the workers themselves as well as the workers and the organizers- are vital to the framework of the centers because without them, the workers have no reason to seek their help (Ebenshade & Toma, 2001). In addition, centers use their much-needed services to draw in more workers for educating, empowering, and organizing, putting their primary focus on long-term goals rather than immediate needs. Instead of providing handouts and everyday services, the organizers strive to show workers the necessity for community action to producing lasting and

effective change, focusing their efforts on “leadership development, popular education, and membership empowerment” (Fine, 2006).

Despite these altruistic ideals, in reality many centers were not created for those purposes but rather for the purpose of containing community conflict. Day laborers’ visibility makes them easy targets for public scrutiny and many times the public sees these centers as the best way to keep conflict between day laborers and the community at a minimum, even with varying degrees of effectiveness within day labor centers (Bosco & Crotty, 2008). Businesses and community members view them as nuisances, littering, loitering, and blocking traffic, (Malpica, 2002). “Primarily in response to merchant and neighborhood complaints of scruffy, unkempt men standing in medium and large groups, municipalities, church groups, and community based organizations entered the informal labor business by creating official or regulated open-air hiring halls,” (Valenzuela, 2004).

While there exists a prevalence of research on the demographics of the day labor population, very few articles analyze the issue from the perspective of a day laborer and the needs specific to this community (Smith, 2008; Valenzuela, 2003; Wakin, 2008). Additionally, while scholars have done ample research on the topic of day laborers from a political standpoint, analyzing the policies that affect the day laborers and the communities they work in, there is an absence of literature analyzing the issue from the perspective of the day laborers themselves (Frasure & Jones-Correa, 2010). It can also be noted that “it is through community interaction and discourse that meanings are created and attached to centers, and ultimately, these meanings constitute the reasons for day laborers to integrate into centers.” Those meanings are often different for the day laborers, the organizers, and the surrounding community (Camou, 2009). The literature presents the idea that the desire for the creation of the centers comes from outside the day labor community itself. The abundance of literature focusing on the reasons for the centers and the ideals behind them provides a stark contrast to the lack of literature exposing the needs of the workers from their perspective, rather than the need projected onto them by the larger academic community.

## METHOD

In order to help close the gap that exists in the literature, I conducted an ethnographic study to gain a deeper understanding of the day laborer centers in the greater Los Angeles area. From January to August 2010, I conducted site visits and interviews at a variety of centers. The majority of the centers are located in neighborhoods of middle to low income, with many in the midst of the Latino ethnic enclaves. At the beginning I emailed different centers, primarily through two different organizations, to find out the possibility of conducting site visits and interviews. I began visiting different centers and speaking with the organizers and the workers. However, I

found it difficult to access the organized centers through email, as many were wary of the study. They questioned my motives for looking deeper into how the centers operated, and did not want me asking the workers too many questions, fearing that I came with a critical eye. Due to lack of resources, many of the centers did not have the freedom to implement new programs if I found they were needed. Additionally, with tight budgets at the government level and funding hard to secure for controversial programs like day labor centers, the organizers were understandably nervous to have anyone look deeper into the system, in case the little funding they had would disappear. I had to be very careful with the wording I chose to explain the purpose of my study. I then found that one way to get around this obstacle was to speak with workers at the unauthorized sites that surrounded many of the organized centers.

In the end, I conducted three formal interviews with staff members at different day labor centers. I gained most of my data through ethnographic observations and site visits, having numerous conversations with individual workers and groups of workers in both the formal centers and informal hiring sites.

Through these site visits and interviews with both workers and organizers, I began to get a picture of the community from the people who formed it. After gaining a better understanding of the issues within the day labor community and at the hiring sites, I decided to focus my study on one specific center in the greater Los Angeles area, to use it as a case study. Through visiting the same center multiple times, I formed relationships with the workers and organizers, gaining access to a part of their lives as day laborers.

I conducted a total of twelve site visits, visiting one center five times. I conducted three one-on-one interviews with workers, and five more group interviews- lasting anywhere from five to forty-five minutes, depending on how many potential employers passed. In addition to these interviews, I also used participant observation to gather some of my vital data. Through spending time waiting with the men, both in the centers and at the informal gathering sites, I observed them in their usual routines, waiting for work. Through this participant observation, I experienced a small piece of what it is like to wait for work- whether on an open, busy street corner, or in a protected center environment- and gained important data through watching the men interact, hearing announcements from organizers, and small comments from the workers themselves.

In every site visit, interview, and event, I brought a notebook for field notes. Initially, the interviews were to be tape-recorded but due to reservations from the organizers, I chose not to. In addition, I hypothesized that not having extra equipment helped my conversations- while hesitant at first, day laborers soon opened up because it felt like just another conversation, rather than an official meeting.

As I mentioned above, access to the community was one of the biggest issues I faced. As a middle class, white female with no known connections to the community, I had to rely on the hope that the organizers and the workers would talk with me, despite my clear status as an outsider. Through speaking Spanish with the day laborers, I slowly

gained their trust. The men rarely expected someone like me to be able to hold a conversation with them in Spanish, let alone conduct interviews. Many times, I drew the workers in with only a few simple exchanges in their native language. They wanted to hear my story, why a young, white, university student spoke Spanish with a distinct Mexican accent. The stories of my time spent in Mexico and Nicaragua helped me win their trust, and a shared love of Latin America helped to bridge the gap created by my status as an outsider in their community.

Societal norms and specific roles of both the workers and myself influenced our conversations. Many times in these social interactions, the workers initially perceived me as a potential employer, or a distraction from waiting for work. When they discovered I was not in fact hiring, many would walk away from me, disappointed and confused as to why I was there. Even with an explanation of my study the men still did not understand why I would break out of what their perception of my normal societal role and talk with them or spend time with them. Some day laborers appreciated that someone from outside their community wanted to understand and be a voice for them, but my conversations also provided something to do while waiting on the street corner- every time a potential employer would pass, my group of 10-15 day laborers would dwindle to 3-5. Through these interactions, the day laborers helped me see a different picture of the community than the one that the literature painted.

The identities of the workers and organizers will be kept confidential throughout this study, as will the locations of the centers visited, to protect an already extremely vulnerable population.

## RESULTS

After numerous site visits to formal and informal centers, I focused on one specific center located in the parking lot of a home improvement store. I chose this site because of the candidness of the workers and the organizers, as well as the proximity to an informal site. Through this center and the services offered I came to find that the different parties involved- both the organizers and the workers- attached different meanings to the centers.

### **The Center**

The center has been open for six years and according to the site manager, workers gathered in the parking lot years before the creation of the center. While about 250 workers come each morning to wait for work around the home improvement store, only about 80 workers can use the center to help find employment due to a lack of resources as well as a lack of physical space. While many centers distribute jobs through a lottery or raffle system, this center chooses a different route. Organizers distribute jobs on a first

come, first serve basis every morning, that also takes into account the specific abilities of each workers: if an employer needs a plumber and the next person on the list is not one, the site manager continues down to list until he or she finds the first day laborer with skills in plumbing.

This center focuses on many different services including GED classes, HIV testing and information, English classes, construction workshops, and workshops on dental hygiene, STDs, and knowing your rights. A teacher from the Los Angeles Unified School District volunteers to teach four times a week during the school year, giving the workers free access to English language classes. Every worker I spoke with both inside and outside the center named the wage claim service as the most valuable service, which allows workers to voice complaints and hold employers accountable. In addition to the wage claim service, the English classes are seen as beneficial as well. According to one of the organizers, learning English is incredibly important as it allows the workers to have “at least minimum communication with employers.” The workers tended to agree with this statement, acknowledging, “if you can speak English, you get more work.”

While organizers use these classes as a representation of the variety of services provided, they appear to exaggerate the frequency and importance of both the construction and rights workshops. The organization’s website lists the classes and the organizers highlighted them frequently during interviews. However, during my site visits to this center, as well as to other centers offering many of the same services, I never observed any classes or workshops, despite visiting at different times, on different days, and planning my trips around when organizers said there would be one. Due to my lack of observation of the classes, I cannot evaluate their effectiveness. I can, however, conclude that they are not held consistently. Despite the emphasis placed on them by the organizers to highlight the important things the center provides, in practice, the workshops are not a priority. Additionally, budget issues may perpetuate this lack of workshops. The necessities for an English class include space, students, and a volunteer teacher, whereas many of the other workshops require resources not as readily accessible- construction materials and skilled professionals available to teach. With funding slim, organizers tend to focus on things they can do that come free or with very little overhead like English classes or providing information for the laborers.

All centers have a system of rules in place to help run the center smoothly. In this case, the workers, facilitated by the organizers, decide on the rules for running the center, gaining access to the resources, the allocation of jobs, as well as punishment for any rules broken. If the workers find a rule is not working, they can change it with a vote among themselves. This gives the workers accountability to themselves and to the community of workers- if they break any rules, they go against guidelines that they themselves helped set in place. According to one of the organizers, the creation and implementation of the rules provides the workers with a sense of ownership of the center, giving them a community in which they are valuable stakeholders.

In addition to the resources for the workers, the center provides emergency cash loans, serving as a buffer to help the men and their families stay afloat under trying financial circumstances. This emergency fund gives workers a small safety net they would not otherwise have. Organizers sell water, chips, and ice cream in the center to raise money for this fund. Then, if a worker needs money for an emergency, such as taking their child to the doctor, buying medicine, or for other emergency reasons, they can borrow from the center, giving them slightly more security than they would otherwise have. Through this program, the men form a community that provides security to everyone involved, ensuring that the men invest in each other's lives and welfare.

While in theory the center fosters a community environment, many times it falls short of its promises. Ideally, the center becomes a place of community, with access to resources for a normally marginalized group. Men gather, learn, and grow both personally and professionally. In reality, the services promised lack the frequency and consistency presented to justify their existence. In order for the men to seek these services, they need to know when they will be offered and how often. They need to understand the importance of belonging to a community like the one provided by the center if they are to take ownership of it. If they do not see it as essential or beneficial, they have no reason to invest time and energy into fostering the community. With no investment from the workers, the goals of the organizers become fruitless.

### **The Organizers**

The organizers' perspective on the center differs from that of the workers, both in theory and practice. On an ideological level, as shown through the mission statement of the organization in charge of the center, they strive to:

1. *Create innovative educational programs that motivate, expand knowledge, promote excellence, enhance awareness of opportunities and foster community identity.*
2. *Build a strong community through education and organizing.*
3. *Engage in community economic development.*
4. *Work to support permanent resident status, family reunification, and active citizenship.*

Their primary goals aim at more than simply finding jobs for these people. They strive to form strong community ties between the men, giving them an understanding of the importance of community as well as the accomplishments the workers can achieved through working together. The organizers attempt to bring the workers together around something that transcends the group, forming a community with stronger bonds than one based only on finding employment. Their goals become about more than the day-to-day life of a day laborer, but also about the future of the day labor community as a whole.



These ideals are supported by Fine's research, which found that organizers "want workers to see that the solution to their conditions requires long-term collective action to alter the relations of power and win concrete and lasting victories," (Fine, 2006).

In contrast to the clear-cut ideas provided by the mission statement, the organizers of the center tended to avoid explicitly attaching meanings to the center. They hinted that it was a place for community building and a place for workers to gather. They pointed out the resources available to the workers through the center, as well as services they helped find for the workers- like health clinics and a place to stay for the night. All of the different organizers I spoke with stressed the importance of raising awareness among the workers and helping them know and understand their rights. They focused on the services that benefited the day labors in the avenues they believed the laborers needed support-through organizing, learning, and developing new skills. However, this view ignored the number one thing many day laborers lack: employment.

For the organizers, the center can also become a place for workers to come together and celebrate. On the center's sixth anniversary, the organizers hosted a party to celebrate the center and the workers. Music, food, dancing, and giveaways filled the day, instead of the usual small talk and waiting. A few workers swelled with pride as the organizers recognized the work they had done for the center. The few who received awards seemed to understand that they were a part of something larger than simply being a day laborer and sensed their unity through the center. However, most of the men watched, not receiving awards, but enjoying the food and change of pace.

At the party, the organizers also recognized the English teacher for the hard work she had put in over the year. They highlighted the successes of the center, and the workers laughed and told stories and jokes in between events. The organizers used the time to talk about the history of the center, bringing the workers back to the roots of the center and reminding them how far they had come together. They used the celebration as a break for the workers, but also to remind the workers about the community of support they have. Everyone, both the workers and the organizers, was excited to have something to celebrate. However, despite these sentiments of accomplishment, it was a drastically different picture than the normal scene of a few workers waiting quietly in the hopes that someone will come to hire them. It was the only time workers seemed engaged in the community around them.

In addition to a place for celebration, the organizers believed that the centers provided a greatly needed sense of fulfillment. According to one program director, without the center, the men do not have everything to be complete. "There is no work, and many are in an unfamiliar country with no access to resources because of a lack of official papers. This center aims to fill those voids." The men lack a sense of fulfillment and have no sense of belonging. Their primarily undocumented status leaves them without a space to call their own in the United States, a society that in many cases attaches or withdraws value from the people living and working here based on their

immigration status. The centers combat this obstacle by providing education about the rights these men do have, despite their lack of legal documents. The centers accomplish this by making resources available, while providing a place for people with common goals and needs to meet and learn about programs. A site manager at another center believes that “the center is about finding a safe place where they can learn different skills to help improve their lives ... we try to show the workers the good things while also understanding the reality of being a day laborer.” The center evolves from a place where day laborers find work to a place focused on building a strong community and sense of self, about knowing and understanding the realities one lives everyday while discovering ways to rise above certain struggles. “When you see a person you have no idea what is in their heart, you have to try to give them hope and heal their scars ... something little can make a difference. If we just listen for five minutes, they open their hearts,” summarized another organizer. The organizers believe that the center can be a place of healing, a place of dealing with the struggles presented by a new country and new realities. They try to create a space that heals these wounds.

Despite the services and ideals created and implemented by the organizers, the centers struggle with attracting both workers and potential employers. At most of the informal sites, signs are put up in the parking lot encouraging employers not to hire workers who gather in the parking lot, but rather, to go to the center to hire them. Despite the signs, most employers continue to hire workers from the informal sites. Some continue hiring from the informal sites out of convenience or habit, while others prefer it because of the vulnerability of the workers and lack of regulations. While reluctant, even the organizers pointed out this problem. “There are many day laborers that don’t want to come [to the centers]. They’d rather be outside and having, in some ways, more opportunities to go to work because some employers are not willing to come to the center.” Employers continue to seek out workers where there is no accountability, where the employers can choose to follow or reject whichever rules he or she sets in place to guide the interaction. Workers have always congregated on the street corners, and employers have always hired them there- there is no reason for employers to switch hiring locations. Additionally, many times the centers are tucked in back corners under overpasses, or off to the side of parking lots making them difficult to find for anyone, even someone looking for them. One site manager, in an attempt to discredit the hiring happening at the informal sites, pointed to the dangers of searching for employment at an informal site. “Outside they fight each other for jobs. It’s dangerous for both the employers and the men. The employer gets scared doesn’t hire any of them.” While this struggle for jobs does happen, the reality shows that most employers do not get scared away. Most employers will deal with the swarms of men all trying to secure a job at the informal sites rather than going through a center in order to hire whichever laborer they deem to fit their job. Possibly they have always hired men through the informal site, or they have never heard of organized centers, but many times it is due to both the

convenience of finding someone quickly out on the street corner where the transaction takes just a few minutes, and the lack of regulations and oversight involved.

According to the organizer, some workers do not like the formality of the centers while others leave because they feel they are not getting enough work. If workers feel they are not getting work in the center, they will return to the street, which provides a difficulty for the centers, especially since the downturn in the economy. “We used to get 20 people hired in a day. Now it’s more like 5-8.” Such a steep decline in workers hired comes with very real consequences. While the organizers seemed disturbed by the change, no one mentioned ways to turn that number around. They spoke about the benefits of the centers from their perspective, focusing on the services and ignoring the lack of economic opportunities. In their perspective, community, in a deep and more abstract sense held the most significance in the lives of the day laborers and employment became a secondary concern. This view provided a stark contrast to the priorities expressed and shown by the day laborers.

### **The Workers**

Juxtaposed to the perspective of the organizers is that of the workers. The day laborers do not prioritize organization or community creation, but rather finding employment and a way to support themselves. The community that they create is simply a way to pass the time while waiting for a job, rather than the goal in their interactions.

Some of this research coincided with the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa, and the games provided ample opportunities to observe the men as they waited for work. Right before a game started, the men would turn on the television and the center would fill to the brim with workers, doubling and sometimes tripling the number of men. They sat on the chairs, the tops of tables and bookshelves, stood in aisles and doorways. Numerous others, who simply could not fit in the small space already saturated with workers, crowded the outside of the center to get glimpses of the game. The men cheered when their team did well and swore loudly when their favorite player missed a shot. At the conclusion of the game, all but a few workers got up and left the center, most returning for the game later that afternoon if they still had not found work. The organizers tried to stop the workers from leaving, explaining the services offered through the center as the men quickly filed out, but no one stopped to listen. The actions of the day laborers on World Cup days provided a stark contrast to the picture the organizers painted of why workers need the center and why they come. While the workers seemed to form a community during the games, they did not acknowledge the community as a meaningful part of their occupation. They only came to watch the games while they waited for work, focused on the game but with one eye on the constant look out for potential employers. Without the games, many of the men would have had no reason to come into the center, as highlighted by the stark contrast in numbers during and after the games.

One of the few men who stayed after the games pointed out why he chose to stay in the center that afternoon. “We come here to rest when there is no work- to rest, hang out with friends.” Surprised by his answer, I inquired about whether or not he looks for work. He shrugged as he said nonchalantly, “Ya, I guess to look for work too.” According to this man, he found work through a network of past employers and the center’s primary purpose was to pass time and avoid the heat. He made no connection to the many different resources provided by the center, nor to the employment the center found, but rather focused on the center as a last resort, when he knew there was no work and was tired of waiting.

One day, as I visited the men who chose to look for work outside of the center at an informal site, I saw a man who I had talked with in the center on a few of my visits. He always seemed to appreciate the work the center did, and had good relationships with the other workers as well as the organizers. When I expressed my confusion about him being at the informal site, he explained that the center is just one of the ways he looks for work. This man goes to the center to see his friends and sign up in the morning. If he isn’t in the first couple of names, he explained, he isn’t likely to find work. As he sees it, he doubles his chances of finding employment by putting his name down and then waiting outside. Where this man spends his day depends on where the work opportunities lay. The higher his chances in the center, the more likely he will stay, but nothing keeps him from leaving when chances are low. He, and many of the workers, do not seem to value the work the center does other than adding a little structure to a very fluid job market, through the waitlist for hiring and the wage claim service. Employment is the one and only priority.

While some workers use the centers, whether regularly or occasionally, many workers have never been to a center and offer a slightly different perspective. When some of these workers congregating at an informal site were asked about their reasons for not using the resources of the center, one man, supported by the comments and nods of approval by his peers, pointed to the unfairness of this center. “They steal jobs from each other in the center. The people who run the centers have a lot of favoritism and only give certain people the best jobs. Also, some people wake up very early, while others sleep in and it doesn’t matter. They all get put into a raffle so who cares when you came?” To this man, and those around him who agreed with him, the only purpose for the centers is to find employment. Since the specific center he spoke about used a lottery system for job allocation, he saw no reason to leave his employment or lack thereof for the day to chance. At the informal sites, no job allocation system exists. “Here, it is all about luck. Whoever runs the fastest, or does the best hand signals...[laughter from the other workers] No, but it’s true!” These workers would rather leave their employment up to chance, aided by how much attention they can attract, or sometimes how strong and young they look rather than have their fate decided by a lottery.

When asked about the workshops and English classes offered by the center, these same men looked back confused. Assuming at first that my Spanish was at fault, I explained my question again, in another way and the men continued to look at me surprised, including one who had said that he had used the center the previous month. The fact that these men spent every day of every week within 200 yards of the center and did not know about their services made me wonder whether it was a lack of information on their part, a misrepresentation of reality on the part of the centers, or a lack of advertising. These services provide the reasoning for many site organizers as to why the centers exist and what the day laborers need. However, these services become obsolete without the awareness of the population it is intended for. Without their knowledge of what the service is and how it works, the centers cannot fulfill their purpose, as outlined by the organizers.

After discussion on the workshops and classes, these workers agreed that the best way to learn, whether it is English or construction skills, was through experience, rather than workshops that the centers push. One worker said that when a worker begins, he might just carry soil, but “you work your way up, you learn through experience.” The men learned English the same way. They begin learning simple terms for tools and jobs, using other workers with better English proficiency as translators. Eventually, they learn enough to communicate with employers on their own. The workers value learning through hands on experience, rather than learning through study and formal education. To them, all necessary skills can be learned on the job. With this perspective, there is no reason to sit out on a day’s pay to learn about pouring concrete, when it can be learned through a job.

Day labor presents many difficult obstacles to overcome. When asked about the hardest part of being a day laborer, one of the men at the informal site initially jumped in saying waiting for work was the hardest part about day labor. Before he could clarify, another worker interrupted him, contradicting his answer.

*“[the hardest part is that] your boss will take you wherever they want. You’re leaving with a stranger, you don’t know if they are good people. Sometimes they don’t pay you, or they beat you. They won’t give you food or water. It’s especially hard with the new laborers that arrive. The employers will look for the new arrivals and take them saying they just got here so they should have a lot of energy and excitement to work. Or [the new laborers] hear they will be paid \$5, \$6, \$7 dollars an hour and convert it to pesos or lempiras and say ‘Wow! That’s a lot of money!’ They’ll take the job. They don’t know yet. The only way to get past this is to have some bad experiences. Then you learn and you know for next time.”*

Even with much importance placed on experience, this worker acknowledged the difficulty of those lessons. Learning abuse and exploitation through first hand experience is horrible but even with that experience, it sometimes cannot be avoided, especially without the safety net the center can provide through the wage claim and complaints services. While most workers see the services provided by the center as unnecessary, the workers both outside and inside the center recognize the importance of the wage claim service. "One thing the center does is get the name of the employer and his license plates. That way, if there is any exploitation, they can call the police. We don't have that here [at the informal sites]." The day laborers, despite not knowing about the other workshops, recognize the legitimacy that the wage claim services help to infuse in the informal market, striving to protect the workers.

However, the wage claim service is not enough to convince the workers at the informal sites to use the centers. One man claimed that in the centers "on any day, three people might be hired. But here? On a bad day 20 of us will be hired. I was in the center for a month and I never got work. Last week [at the informal site], I worked 3 days." To the workers, they will learn everything in the day labor world through experience, but none of that experience matters without employment. Despite the minimal understanding of what the centers do, the workers recognize small benefits. However, in the eyes of these men, without consistent work or economic security, these small benefits do not outweigh the decreased chance of being hired. They do however acknowledge the divide within the community because of the informal sites and the centers. "It's bad for the center that we are here and it's bad for us that the center is here. We take jobs from them and they take jobs from us. Most employers come here though. If they go to the center and don't like it, they come out here." According to this worker and most others, employers will always come to the informal sites, so he increases his chances of gaining employment, his top priority, by staying in the informal site. The center's benefits- the wage claim service- do not provide enough incentive for workers to use the centers, and the other services are irrelevant.

## CONCLUSION

Day labor centers provide a place for workers to come, meet with friends, and look for work. They provide education on a variety of topics from health, to worker's rights, to English. On the surface, they seem to please everyone involved- the workers receive jobs, the businesses and neighborhoods see that the men no longer congregate on the street corners, and community organizers get a space for educating. However, in practice, the meanings and functions of the centers are more complex.

Workers and organizers, the two main groups who interact at the job centers, both come to the table with different understandings. They attach different meanings to the

activities carried out in the centers, one of which is the search for employment. To the organizers, employment is what will bring laborers to the centers, which then gives the laborers access and exposure to education and ideas about construction, rights, and resources. For the organizers, these workshops are the important pieces of the centers and the reasons the centers exist. It is a place for the workers to gain awareness, learn about their rights, and organize. However, access to these things does not concern the workers. As a community composed of mostly undocumented immigrants, primarily from Latin America, they constantly search for a way to support their families both in the United States and back in their countries of origin. The hope of employment drives them to the streets rain or shine, day in and day out.

Another difference in the perspectives is the idea of community. The organizers see the centers as a place to build a community, which works together to move the laborers forward as a group. Community becomes a main goal in organizing. While the workers do seek community through the centers, community helps pass the time and carries no deeper meaning. To the workers, attempting to solidify a community seems foolish as one never knows who will be waiting for work and who will be working. How can one solidify a community in constant flux?

This divide in the priorities of the workers and the organizers prevents the centers from achieving what should be their true purpose- serving the needs of the day laborer community. To many of these workers, the money earned as a day laborer barely ensures survival, especially when also providing for family, either in the United States or in their country of origin. The pay, averaging about \$10 an hour can be good, but only comes if they have work. For day laborers, the issue is finding employment, a way of survival for them and their families. They need organizing, but it is a luxury many of them cannot afford. When they struggle day in and day out to put food on the table, skipping a day of work for a workshop on HIV/AIDS just is not worth it.

Day labor centers need to shift their focus from rights education to implementing programs that concretely affect the lives of the workers. Recruiting employers needs to be one of the top priorities because without employment, the workers cannot survive. Furthermore, the centers should create additional economic opportunities for the workers while they search for employment. They could create small, economic development schemes, such as building furniture on down time to sell, creating more economic opportunities for the workers, thereby giving them a greater chance at providing for their families.

One way to implement new programs, which include a necessary paradigm shift to focus on the needs of the day laborers, is through recruiting students from local universities to help research, create, and implement new programs and directions for the centers. A partnership such as this would provide a needed hands-on learning experience for undergraduate and graduate students alike, while providing the centers with the flexibility to implement change to better the lives of the people they claim to serve.

The perspective of day laborers have long been ignored in the academic study of the day labor system, causing the larger community that interacts with the laborers to lose sight of their priorities and true needs. People studying day labor and organizing the laborers themselves must not forget to look to the needs of the workers.

In the day laborer community, employment is the key issue but all of the struggles they face stem from a larger issue: immigration. While day labor centers attempt to deal with the immediate issues in the day laborers lives, they cannot begin to tackle the issue that lies at the heart of these struggles. Policies and economic conditions push people out of their home communities, bringing them into a broken immigration system (Cavanagh, Anderson, Serra, & Espinosa, 2002; Churchill, 2004). The fractured system creates a space for day labor, causing issues that cannot be truly solved without addressing the policies set in places. Workers come to reunite with family members, find economic opportunities, or are brought without their consent as children. Regardless of the reasons, their status fosters an environment where workers have no protection in the work place and no other job opportunities other than day labor, forcing them to wait for small jobs, allocated on a day-by-day basis, with no guaranteed pay. These workers face abuses that United States citizens are protected against and have a clear way to voice complaints when not followed. For the immigrants without documents, no one listens to their complaints. Day labor centers attempt to provide a topical treatment for this problem, but without a change in the larger policies, the centers do not have the necessary opportunities to truly help these workers.

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**Footnotes:**

1. The name of this organization is left out for the sake of confidentiality for both the workers and the organizers of the center.



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