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Church opens shelter for day laborers

by Gerhard Schneibel

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April 03, 2009

The day laborers who have gathered in increasing numbers in search of work along Roswell Road just inside I-285 now have a safer place to go: Holy Spirit Catholic Church's Solidarity Mission opened a shelter last month on Northwood Drive.

Deacon Joseph Ruberte of the mission said one of the challenges is getting out the word about the shelter's location. The city of Sandy Springs is in the process of preparing a sign in English and Spanish to direct potential employers and workers to the shelter.

The recession has had a drastic effect on immigrants in Sandy Springs, making it difficult for workers to support their families, Ruberte said. Their plight is complicated because many can't speak English, are in the country illegally and left their families behind.

"The opportunity for employment has decreased," Ruberte said. "A lot of fear is founded on ignorance. I don't mean ignorant in a negative way; I just mean lack of knowledge."

Theo C., 56, has lived in the United States for nine years and has a wife, a teenage daughter and a young son. He has been unemployed four months and said he has no choice but to stay in the United States and continue to look for work on the streets for the sake of his children.

"I think it's called the American dream, right?" Ruberte said.

Jesus H., 27, said he's giving up on the United States after one year here. He was working and sending money back to his wife and young children in Mexico, but now that jobs have vanished, he said he's better off at home.

Rosemary Pinela of the Mexican American Student Alliance works at the Solidarity shelter.

"It's a safer, more dignified alternative to looking for a job on the

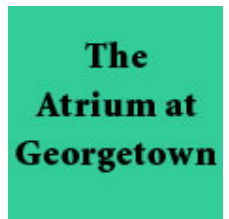


Gerhard Schneibel Day laborers gather for work at the Holy Spirit Catholic Church's Solidarity Mission on Northwood Drive. *(click for larger version)*

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street corner," she said. "We can become a resource, and we can be creative about the situation."

Northwood Drive used to be Copeland Drive but was renamed to improve the reputation of the area before Sandy Springs was incorporated. The Solidarity Village there houses several businesses, the Holy Spirit Catholic Center, a playground and now the day labor center.

"It was an effort to make this into a more positive environment," Ruberte said. "In most Hispanic countries, the way a town is set up, there's usually a central plaza. That's where the church is located, and it's a communal area where people can congregate."

Ruberte and Pinela plan to offer English classes to waiting workers, along with other self-improvement classes and medical and dental services.

They also hope to forge a relationship with the police to keep the immigrants and citizens safe.

"They're here to protect them, too," Ruberte said. "I'm in agreement with the police that it's a very serious traffic hazard on that corner (Roswell Road and Northwood Drive). It's in our best interest to eliminate it in a positive manner."

Police Sgt. O.J. Concepcion works in the department's new South Sector under Lt. Scott Jamison. Concepcion speaks fluent Spanish, so he has become an unofficial liaison for the police around Northwood Drive.

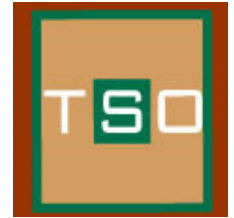
"I try to stay there and be visible, just so they see me and they cooperate and they know where they're supposed to stand," he said. "It's already better than it was a month ago."

Concepcion said monthly meetings with the owners of mom-and-pop businesses on Northwood Drive will help the Police Department be more effective, and he asked for citizens to be patient about the day laborer situation.

"It's tough because we want to try to make it fair," he said. "We don't want to start putting them in jail because that's not going to solve the problem, and it can put us in a situation where we're violating their civil rights when they're out here looking for work."

Workers can register with the day labor center, putting them in line for work on a first-come, first-served basis.

Enforcing that system will take some of the chaos and risk out of the workers' situation, Concepcion said. "There are some of them that are not registering, so they'll hide from us. When they see cars going by looking for labor, they'll kind of jump right in and skip people who are following rules. There needs to be an officer there consistently on a daily basis, even on the weekends."



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