

A labor of love: Cross county organization assists day laborers with job placement

December 24, 2013, 05:00 AM By [Samantha Weigel](#) Daily Journal



Samantha Weigel/Daily Journal

Local day laborers and their families took a break from seeking work yesterday for lunch, goodies and a chance to be together at a holiday gathering held by the Multicultural Institute.

The nonprofit institute helps laborers prepare and find work year round, but Monday afternoon it helped them find a bit of joy with their families.

"I'm grateful that there's stuff like this going on. Because you need a boost around [the holidays]," said Oscar, a day laborer who recently became involved with the Multicultural Institute.

The lunch, held at St. Anthony's Parish in Menlo Park, was a labor of love by volunteers from the San Mateo County Sheriff's Office, San Mateo County Human Services Agency and Samaritan House who came to serve food, hand out gifts and toys to dozens of day laborers and their families. After lunch, adults won tools, clothes and gift cards during a raffle and children were greeted by a police car jam packed with toys.

Work tends to slow down during the winter months, so hosting family-oriented charitable events is important, said the Rev. Rigoberto Calocarivas, who goes by Rigo, founder of the Multicultural Institute. "It's one event that brings them all together, in a festive way. They don't have to be out, competing for work on the streets," Rigo said.

For more than seven years, the program has used a unique and accessible approach to assist those seeking job placements, Rigo said. "Unlike other places where you bring people into the center ... with our approach we go out there and connect to the people. What the day laborer really likes is the personal connection," Rigo said.

The Multicultural Institute has developed a network of employers who contact their center looking for help. Staff know of the popular areas where day laborers wait and travel to offer work they otherwise wouldn't have known about. The most important aspect to the success of the program is about communication and trust, Rigo said.

"[Staff] always connects with them, they know about what's going on in their personal life. That makes a big difference. The key word there is trust, once that happens it's easier to deal with what issues come up," Rigo said.

Staff and volunteers build connections with those who are typically untrusting, said program assistant Ramón Gomez-Ortiz.

He frequents where he knows the men wait, spends time getting to know them and helps place them with work. He had seen Oscar many times and knew he was dedicated to finding work before the two connected, Gomez-Ortiz said.

Oscar has a range of versatile skills including welding, construction, concrete and asphalt pouring and general manual labor. Often, though, he would spend hours on end waiting without finding any work, Oscar said.

But the Multicultural Institute is much more efficient and now he gets call from people looking for help, Oscar said.

Oscar is Columbian but born in America and legally allowed to work. The stereotype of who a day laborer is isn't always accurate; many come from different socio-economic backgrounds, Gomez-Ortiz said.

The Multicultural Institute offers a wide range of free services in San Mateo, Alameda and Contra Costa counties. It offers GED preparation courses, youth academic programs, connects them with medical services and provides temporary and emergency housing. The programs are supported by grants, donations, funds from special events and the county, Rigo said.

Sheriff's Deputy Javier Acosta has volunteered with the Multicultural Institute and worked with day laborers for two years. He serves as the liaison between the Sheriff's Office and day laborers who may be fearful of law enforcement, Acosta said.

Since he started volunteering and getting to know some of the men, problematic encounters have been greatly reduced, Acosta said.

"It's been good to work with the Multicultural Institute and the day laborers," Acosta said. "And come together to minimize issues with law enforcement and the community."

For more information about the Multicultural Institute or to donate, volunteer or find help with a job visit Mlonline.org

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