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Day laborers seen as a local issue

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Local government officials said yesterday they want to focus on resolving day-labor issues in their communities and that the federal government should deal with immigration enforcement.

"Local governments need to find solutions for local issues," said J. Walter Tejada, Arlington County Board member. "For those who want to talk about immigration, please run over to [Capitol] Hill and talk to the legislators there in Congress and the president. They're the ones who can make that type of legislation come through."

Prince George's County Council member Will Campos, a Democrat, agreed.

"A lot of day laborers are in fact undocumented, and even though immigration is a federal issue, that fact alone isn't going to get rid of this situation," he said. "So you can either choose to let it go or do something about it because if you leave it to the federal government, you may be waiting for quite a while."

Both men made their comments yesterday at a summit where about 100 advocacy group members and elected officials heard recommendations on how to deal with the gathering of day laborers at sites throughout the Washington area.

The summit is thought to be the first that focuses on the day-laborer issue. It was held by the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG).

Those who attended included Michael O'Reilly, mayor of Herndon; Tom Perez, Montgomery County Council president; Kathy Porter, mayor of Takoma Park; Andres Tobar, director of the Shirlington Employment and Education Center; and Gustavo Torres, executive director of CASA of Maryland.

Local jurisdictions are deciding whether to establish formal gathering sites for day laborers, many of whom are illegal aliens. Some centers are funded by taxpayer money.

During the summer, Herndon came under fire when its council approved a formal gathering site for day laborers. As a result, six residents have sued the town, and a local Minuteman chapter has begun monitoring employers who hire illegals outside a 7-Eleven in town.

Last month, a plan to open a formal day-laborer center in Gaithersburg was put on hold after residents complained that the city didn't discuss the matter publicly.

Day laborers gather at at least eight formal or informal spots in Northern Virginia, six in the Maryland suburbs and two in the District.

At the summit, Mr. Perez said Montgomery County still intends to foot the bill for the day-labor center in Gaithersburg.

"It is not an 'if' question but a 'where will it be' question," said Mr. Perez, a Democrat. "[The county has] put the money on the table ... and I'm confident in the next couple months it will be complete."

Prince George's County, within six months, will open its first day-laborer center in Langley Park, Mr. Campos said.

"This is not a Hispanic issue. This is a social issue," Mr. Campos said, noting that U.S.-born Hispanics and immigrants and illegal aliens from Africa make up a small percentage of laborers.

Some urged COG to educate the public on day-labor issues, while others said COG should provide local jurisdictions with tips on opening formal centers.

"We need to look at creating a prototype of best practices," said Mr. Tejada, a Democrat.

The key is to encourage employers to use formal centers and discourage laborers from loitering on residential and business properties, officials said.

Neighborhoods in Virginia, Maryland and the District have problems with day laborers, who loiter in parking lots in search of day-to-day work. Residents and shop owners complain that the men litter, urinate in public and harass women.

However, the officials overwhelmingly supported creating family-support centers, in place of day-laborer centers, so officials could focus on helping immigrant women get jobs. CASA officials said women represent about 35 percent of laborers.

That idea was proposed by Carlos Castro, a former day laborer who now owns Todos Supermarkets. He pledged \$5,000 to the project.

"What I propose is we look at ... a community center that provides support to the whole community," Mr. Castro said.

Projected job and population-growth statistics show that the region by 2030 will gain about 2 million people, 1.5 million jobs, two-thirds of which will be in services and construction, said Paul DesJardin, COG's chief of housing and planning. Mr. DesJardin said those numbers suggest that there is a need for day laborers to build homes and offices.

"There will be a tremendous need for workers in the next 25 to 30 years and we're already seeing those impacts today," he said.

COG officials said they hope to provide local jurisdictions with recommendations by spring.