

Day labor halls can be a nightmare of rules for workers: study

February 20 2012, By M.B. Reilly



A Cincinnati day labor hall.

Day labor halls are privately run temp agencies that provide a form of daily employment where potential workers show up at pre-dawn hours in the hope of landing a day's work.

Day labor halls can be grim, rule-bound, low-paid sources of work for homeless, unemployed, underemployed, ex-convicts and others on the lowest rungs of America's socioeconomic ladder. What's even worse than the undesirability of these jobs is their decreasing availability in many cities.

A snapshot of day laborers and their urban experience will be provided at the Feb. 24-28 Association of American Geographers annual meeting thanks to University of Cincinnati research. That research is being presented by Colleen McTague, assistant professor of geography, on

Feb. 24.

A Cincinnati day labor hall.

If you've never heard of them, day labor halls fill the unskilled labor needs of companies, consisting of jobs such as sorting recyclables, light manufacturing, cleaning stadiums and convention centers, construction and landscaping.

The UC research consisted of 499 interviews of Greater Cincinnati day laborers at almost all of Cincinnati's day labor halls, some of which have since gone out of business or relocated due to the challenges posed by the current economy. Some are locally-owned independent agencies, and others are national chains that operate local agencies.

Said McTague, "Day labor halls – as exploitive as some of their work rules are – are often the only legal option for those at the lowest rungs of the economy. Already, some of the day labor halls we studied are out of business, victims of the recession. Some have moved from Ohio to Kentucky where minimum wage and tax rates are lower. While many businesses make use of such halls, they frequently give them little respect and are slow to pay up on the contracts. That puts a lot of economic pressure on the halls."

She added, "When we visited and studied these halls in 2008, the operators consistently said that business was down 30-50 percent, likely due to the beginning of the recession."

The purpose of the survey was to determine how many day laborers there are in Cincinnati, how many seek jobs daily, weekly or monthly, why they seek those jobs, what are the challenges posed by those jobs and more.

- After taxes, transportation and safety equipment fees (see below) and check-cashing fees charged to day laborers by labor halls, the average wage per day for a day laborer in Cincinnati is \$48.53
- In Cincinnati, race and gender play a significant role in determining who seeks day-labor jobs. Seventy-six percent of day-labor job seekers are male, and 65 percent are African American. Just over half (51 percent) are African American men.
- Felons comprise a large proportion of the day-labor pool (52 percent), suggesting that it is difficult for them to find stable employment and enter or re-enter the full-time, permanent workforce. In fact, a majority of felon day laborers surveyed (62 percent) indicated they were not hired in the past due to past convictions, even though the majority (55 percent) committed their last crime more than ten years ago.
- For the most part, day-labor job seekers in Cincinnati do not qualify for and do not receive welfare payments (65 percent).

MORE ON DAY LABOR HALLS

According to statistics from Dick Reavis of North Carolina State, author of "Catching Out: The Secret World of Day Laborers," nearly 1.5 million Americans regularly seek work through day labor agencies.

Said Reavis, "When the economy first fell, business declined, and a lot of mom and pop day labor halls closed. The survivors experienced a glut of applicants, both from the closed halls and the newly unemployed. A lot of them (day labor halls) quit taking on new workers. All of them 'improved' the quality of their workforce because jobless skilled and semi-skilled workers were available to fill any openings."

He theorized that day labor halls that have survived thus far are probably

experiencing an upturn. Added Reavis, “When economies begin to recover, companies often hire day laborers until they believe that a recovery will hold.”

A RULE-BOUND WORKPLACE

In her study, McTague found that the supply of day labor hall workers exceeded demand. Thus, most reporting in and hoping for a day or a few days’ work were turned away. Those who obtain temporary employment face abusive rules from their two employers (the hiring hall and the firm or person contracting with the hall). For instance:

-- Generally, workers gaining employment via the day labor hall cannot travel directly to a job site, even if they are working at a site long term and have their own means of transportation. They must generally come to the day labor hall at a very early hour and then be transported to the job site – with a fee charged to them for said transportation. The same methods for the late-at-night end of the work day. Workers generally cannot travel directly home but must return to the labor hall via agency van or bus. This transportation fee cuts into the already meager wages.

-- When an injury or illness occurs on the job, regardless of its nature, day laborers are often required to return to the day labor hall to complete paperwork before seeking treatment. (Remember that most day laborers work in somewhat hazardous conditions.) If an injured laborer leaves a job site without permission, he is still charged a travel fee, pay is withheld for 28 days and a DNR is issued. (A DNR is a Do Not Return slip, meaning a worker is virtually cut off from any job possibility via the day labor hall.)

-- Nearly 80 percent of those surveyed by McTague traveled to the day labor hall on foot. Most of the rest arrived and departed by means of a public bus.

-- Day labor workers are often marked at employment sites, i.e., a different color safety helmet. The day laborers are also required to rent any safety equipment they use, such as helmets, boots or gloves. This additional fee means that day laborers will often make less than minimum wage. Paying a fee can result in a DNR.

-- Nearly all of them want full-time permanent work.

Said McTague, “Many of the rules – entering the day labor hall by the rear door – are designed to make these laborers invisible to the larger society. Others – like the wearing of specially colored safety helmets – are designed to keep them under surveillance as though they were working within the prison system.”

In looking at day labor halls, it’s clear that felons seeking work and social re-entry by means of those halls can face a difficult challenge, according to McTague. The low wages paid to these workers make it difficult if not impossible to make ends meet. Many of these workers then must depend on social service agencies to fill in the economic gap.

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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