

BUILDING CONSENSUS AROUND DAY LABOR ISSUES

Loitering, littering, harassing and illegal activities were common words heard around the tiny town of Graton, California to describe the men, mostly from Oaxaca, Mexico, who gather every day to wait for work on a one block stretch of downtown. The number varies from 30-120 men depending on the season. They stand in the pouring winter rain and the hot summer sun often risking their safety as they run into the street for cars and trucks to stop to pick them up for a day of construction, landscaping or home improvements.

There is a long history of day laborer presence in Graton. But over the last decade this unincorporated town in west Sonoma County went through a major facelift as abandoned storefronts and bars became restaurants and galleries. These changes gave rise to growing tensions between image and social justice, safety and traffic hazards, homelessness and environmental quality among residents, business owners, day laborers and members of the board of a non-profit trying to build a hiring hall in town. Citizens have started demanding legal solutions from the county and the sheriff's office.

In the fall of 2002 Abel Enriquez who had been in the United States for several years was still waiting for work most mornings on the sidewalks of Graton. Susan Capelis, a long time resident who owns a small manufacturing wholesale jewelry company in Graton led a petition drive during that fall in response to Central Labor de Graton's (CLG) proposed establishment of a day labor center near downtown Graton garnering 450 signatures during a two week neighborhood campaign. Little did they know that within a few months they would be sitting around a table together trying to find a solution to a problem that was dividing the community.

Day laborers who are usually Latin American and African immigrants seeking short-term work on street corners down the coast of California over to Phoenix to Chicago and on to the east coast including New York, Maryland and the DC area. Their numbers are increasing nationally as the demand for their services increases especially in landscaping and construction. Businesses and residents file complaints with local law enforcement about places where day laborers congregate regarding traffic, parking, sanitation, and loitering while day laborers risk their safety as they scramble to cars and trucks competing for jobs and fair wages.

Communities around the country have responded to the situation in different ways from government-initiated tax-supported centers in Los Angeles and Phoenix to routine enforcement by police to manage day laborers which has often proven ineffective. This is the story of a small community of 2000 residents in California who chose to approach the problem through consensus building.

Graton, California's long history of day laborer presence begins even before the railroad was built in 1906. Long-term residents can recall Graton as a gathering place for Chinese day laborers in the early decades of the twentieth century, followed by migrant workers from Oklahoma in the 1930's. Over the past few decades, the day labor population has been primarily from Mexico. Graton evolved from a railroad town, to a cannery town to nearly a ghost town in the span of a century and then in the last decade went through a dramatic economic transformation of its downtown.

And it is over this last decade that the congregation of laborers downtown caused an increasing sense of discomfort for many of the residents and members of the growing business community. Their concerns ranged from traffic to trash to personal safety to contamination of the local creek. Inconsistent work opportunities and the cost of housing made the situation worse for the day labor population, encouraging crowded or substandard housing conditions as well as seasonal homelessness. After several years of ad hoc efforts to address some of these issues, the Centro Laboral de Graton, a non-profit organization, was founded in late 2000 to develop a "just and effective solution" that would lead to the establishment of a labor center in Graton "where laborers can find work in a just and dignified manner." A major fundraising campaign was launched to achieve this goal.

In the fall of 2002 Centro Laboral de Graton proposed the establishment of a day labor center near downtown Graton that would include a lounge, laundry, bathrooms, showers, lockers, English classes, medical and legal clinics and job training. Although, the concept of a hiring hall was supported by most of the community, the scope of the proposed center was not. And many members of the community felt that their concerns regarding the impact of day labor issues on the local community were not being heard. A petition asking that Centro Laboral de Graton revisit their proposal quickly gathered 450 signatures. Those who signed wanted to see expanded community dialogue and the implementation of a forum for public feedback. Many Graton residents feared that a center with services would bring more day laborers to Graton and increase contamination of the creek. They also wanted to see an anti-solicitation ordinance in place when the center opened.

At this point of polarization, the North Bay Consensus Council (NBCC) was contacted by Centro Laboral de Graton (CLG). A meeting comprised of residents, business owners and board members of CLG was scheduled and the NBCC was invited to explore the possibility of bringing together stakeholders to work on the contentious issues. That meeting was in November of 2002. In October of 2003 after months of negotiations an agreement was reached on recommendations for the development of a day labor center.

Some key provisions of the agreed upon recommendations are:

- Creating one hiring location that is on the main corridor but not on the main drag or adjacent to the creek or a residential area.
- Employing a staff person who will manage the center and act as a liaison with the community.

- Reducing camping in the highly sensitive areas of the riparian corridor.
- Increasing compliance with rules in the less sensitive areas of the riparian corridor.
- Increasing work opportunities for day laborers.
- Educating workers about community standards in an effort to reduce trash and improve public behavior.
- Maintaining an aggressive campaign to educate employers and community members to utilize the labor center (in lieu of an anti-solicitation ordinance).
- Implementing a formal evaluation process to measure the effectiveness of the day labor center.

What does it take for a community to create a shared vision of the future? It takes the hard work, commitment, open heart, deep listening and creativity that were demonstrated by the community of Graton.

Abel has become a leader in the ongoing efforts to establish the day labor center. He serves on the Community Implementation Committee. When asked about the experience he talked about having greater confidence to understand others despite language differences and the opportunity to express himself more fully. Abel said that participating in the process, “helped me to become friends with good citizens who have the desire to help me and my fellow countrymen and that means a lot to me.”

Susan Capelis works with Abel on the Community Implementation Committee and she talks about consensus building being a transformative experience “to go from a group having opposing points of view to achieving understanding, respect and the ability to work together was a remarkable and unexpected outcome.”

If you would like more detailed information on the agreement and a copy of the evaluation from this project, go to the North Bay Consensus Council’s website at www.nbconsensus.org

If you would like more information on Day Labor Issues contact the Day Labor Research Institute at www.daylabor.org

The Community Building Institute is looking for more stories of how consensus building approaches are being used to address issues involving day laborers. If you have a story, drop a note to the [editor](#).

Annette Townley is the executive director of the North Bay Consensus Council and led the consensus building project team.