

FROM SERVICES TO ACTIVISM: HOW LATINO DAY LABORERS AND DOMESTIC WORKERS ARE ADVOCATING FOR THEMSELVES

CASA of Maryland, Inc.
Takoma Park, Maryland

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SUMMARY: For over a decade, Gustavo Torres and CASA of Maryland have been **working with day laborers, tenants and domestic workers to fight and advocate for themselves**. The organization responds to the growing phenomenon of immigrants working as temporary laborers, ripe for exploitation. Going **beyond services**, CASA also develops workers as leaders in their communities and engages them in broader policy issues. Their approach includes the following:

- **Create Employment Centers:** CASA organizes centers across the state where day laborers can gather to receive services and training, and to be available for work. Through the centers, workers establish relationships with reputable employers and demand a baseline wage.
- **Build Leadership on A Range of Issues:** From housing to health care, workers emerge as leaders on a range of issues. CASA provides them with training and support.
- **Engage Public Policy:** CASA works on the local, state and federal levels to impact on the full array of issues that affect immigrant workers. They also train workers to give testimony and speak directly with elected officials about their issues.
- **Participate in Coalitions:** Ultimately, Torres and his colleagues must engage a broad array of interests and groups to be successful on any initiative.

The following case example illustrates how CASA of Maryland is unleashing the power of those directly affected, and making a difference for day laborers, domestic workers and their families:

CREATING “CO-AUTHORS IN JUSTICE”

CASA of Maryland, Inc.

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In helping Latino immigrants learn English, a teacher and activist with CASA of Maryland discovered that some of the newcomers can be painfully eloquent even as they struggle with a new language. "I had spent a morning in a class with day laborers," she says. "One of the workers came up to me after class and in broken English started talking about cats and mice. At first I was confused because we hadn't been discussing cats and mice in class, but I kept listening and after a long time I realized he was talking about how he felt like a mouse in front of the cat, the cat being the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. It was actually very moving to me, because it was just such a strong statement; nobody should have to feel like that in front of another human being."

Yet the image eloquently captures the view that many have of the immigrants who make up the huge day laborer and domestic worker corps that has ballooned into the tens of thousands in the U.S.: seemingly powerless in the face of a host of forces, from the INS—on the lookout for illegal aliens—to unscrupulous employers—looking for cheap, off-the-books, expendable labor.

But CASA of Maryland, a Montgomery County-based organization that advocates for Latino laborers and domestic workers, belies that image. It was to redress such power inequities that the organization was formed just over a decade ago as it sought to organize workers and inform them of their rights, both as employees and as participants in the U.S. labor market. But in working with laborers, CASA of Maryland was never so much interested in advocating for laborers and domestic workers as it was in teaching them to advocate for themselves. "That is very, very important," says Gustavo Torres, Executive Director of CASA. "We want to see the domestic workers, the day laborers and other low-wage workers actively participating in advocating for themselves, actively participating in their own lives so that they are the coauthors of justice at every level."

From the side streets to the front lines

CASA of Maryland has its roots in a growing labor phenomenon that has manifested itself nationwide: groups of immigrant laborers gathering at intersections and in parking lots mostly in urban and suburban areas, putting themselves up as a pool of temporary labor for any employer who might need a hand that morning, that day or that week. Such ad hoc gathering spots are frequently viewed by communities as undesirable- clusters of itinerant workers with attendant problems of trash, loitering and even crime. And so they frequently become a target for law enforcement and other community crackdowns. Besides facing community opposition, says Torres, such groups of workers are ripe for exploitation as a labor pool. They usually receive no insurance benefits from employers; they have no job security and no assurance that employers will pay them a fair wage, or even pay them at all. If such workers get hurt on the job, they typically have no access to workers compensation or other health care. Some employers count on workers' reluctance to pursue legal action around issues of pay and injury due to workers'

insecurity over their legal status, and a lack of understanding when it comes to their rights under U.S. labor and health and safety laws.

But if such an immigrant group is ripe for exploitation, CASA of Maryland quickly discovered it was also a group ready for organization and action. In fact, it was old-fashioned grassroots street activism and action—marches, sit-ins, vigils and eventually community meetings—that led to the creation of CASA of Maryland's first Employment Center—a recognized, permanent place where immigrants could gather to find work, instead of standing around on street corners and in parking lots across the city. "We developed various street activities to call attention to the issue," says a CASA organizer who now works at Silver Spring, Maryland, Job Center. "Various pacifist demonstrations in the area, press conferences and we did this over the course of several weeks." The action paid off, he recalls. "We put the issue of a work center on the county's agenda and we started to talk to the politicians, to the police, to local businesses and community leaders. And it was the workers themselves who succeeded in pulling together this group of activists."

The employment center was the centerpiece of CASA of Maryland's Day Labor Assistance Project. CASA's original aim was to address both community and worker concerns by creating a single, safe place where workers and employers could converge, a place where workers could not only come to find employment, but also learn more about their rights under U.S. law, where they could learn job skills along with English, and where they could come if they had a grievance against a particular employer. But the movement has grown into a provider of much broader services, from legal help, to educational programs.

Since launching its first Employment Center, CASA has worked with nearly two dozen other organizations to launch its Center for Employment and Training, which includes several sites across the state. CASA has established standing relationships with some of the state's largest construction companies, steering hundreds of laborers into permanent jobs, and thousands more into temporary, high-wage work with reputable, responsible employers. At the same time, the Center also offers job training, English instruction, and health, housing and legal counseling, but not as charity. CASA of Maryland actually allows activists to build up a bank of "time dollars" through work for the organization, which can then be used to "purchase" services from CASA of Maryland. It is one more way, says Torres, to give immigrants the sense that they have control and aren't dependent on anyone or any organization for charity.

Expanding issues, discovering leaders

In setting up its first employment center, CASA of Maryland quickly learned two things: First, that it wasn't only employment issues that were of concern to day laborers and domestic workers. Issues of health care, housing, education and legal status were all of paramount importance. "I was working on organizing day laborers," says a senior staff member of the Silver Springs Job Center. "But they had a variety of problems from tenant issues to health care. One of our first actions was working with tenants at a group of apartments that was trying to push immigrants out."

Second, CASA learned that among the laborers and domestic workers they were serving were the real leaders of the growing movement towards workers' and tenants' rights, the real "co-authors of justice." "It happens on a weekly basis that someone will come into our office who has already started organizing," says an activist with CASA. "We actually can't keep up with the

amount of initiative that people out there are showing; tenants with problems in their apartment complex that have already begun to work together; a group of workers who have already been organizing a slow down at their work site because of the treatment they're receiving on the job." Another sign of how workers have taken organizing into their own hands: Those laborers who gather at CASA of Maryland job centers have a standing policy of refusing to sign on to any job for less than \$10 an hour; anyone who pulls up offering less is waved on.

It is tapping into that collective power that has allowed CASA such success so far. "When you look at components of empowerment," says Torres, "CASA is probably 10 percent, the community is the other 90 percent."

Street-level action leads to political action

CASA's bread and butter have traditionally been in the direct services it provides immigrants. At the most basic level it helps workers and tenants with such basics as food and clothing, and it even intervenes directly with some employers. For example, if CASA learns of a domestic worker being blackmailed into serving a household, it will go as far as "liberating" that worker through direct action. It also offers extensive legal counseling around employment and housing—CASA has helped hundreds of tenants fight eviction and has helped workers recover hundreds of thousands of dollars in unpaid wages from laggard employers. CASA also offers English classes, a women's self-esteem course and a health care advocacy and awareness program that involves training dozens of health care "promotores" to circulate throughout the community to discuss issues of AIDS and cancer prevention and treatment, along with other health issues. Meanwhile CASA is also working with the University of Maryland on a program aimed specifically at grooming community leaders in order to create a broad base of hundreds of activists statewide, a program that has already graduated and unleashed 100 leaders in low-income Latino communities statewide.

But in advocating at the street level, CASA has learned that most roads lead to broader policy issues, issues of employment, immigration, health and housing law that take CASA to the halls of local, state and federal power. At the local level, CASA has worked with county officials on everything from health care to housing issues, including setting up its Employment Center. Recently it successfully pushed an initiative to have hefty loitering fines suspended for immigrants caught congregating at certain sites where community opposition to such gathering points has been particularly harsh. CASA is also part of a continuing effort to push a living wage law for Montgomery County. At the state level, it regularly participates in coalition efforts aimed at immigrant concerns around health and housing, education and employment. At the federal level, CASA was part of a recent, successful coalition that won special fast-track visa rights under the Victims of Trafficking Act, a law aimed at helping those who had been coerced to come to the U.S. as virtual slave labor. In pushing for the act, CASA pioneered yet another approach to grassroots political activism. Where many advocacy organizations have "experts"—lawyers, academics, executive directors, professional lobbyists—testify before Congress, CASA makes a point of using real people with street-level experience who will actually be affected by the law. For example, CASA's testimony on the Victims of Trafficking Act was given by a domestic worker who had originally come to the U.S. as virtual captive labor. "She was the national expert," says a CASA activist. "She had spent untold hours talking to hundreds of other domestic workers. She was able to present across a broad sweep of experience, her own and that

of others in her situation. It was a situation where the community members themselves were recognized as the experts."

What makes CASA effective as a lobbying organization, say CASA activists, is that the organization lets immigrant workers tell their own stories. CASA has a formal 40-hour training program for immigrant activists to turn street-wise workers into policy-savvy activists. "This is a very different experience from the countries they're from," says a CASA staff member—countries like El Salvador and Colombia, where political oppression has been the rule. "Many aren't even aware that the opportunity for such action even exists here." It is a strategy that is particularly powerful, because the voices that policy makers are hearing are the voices of those most impacted by some policy or other. "Politicians really listen when a low-wage worker or a domestic worker or a family comes and talks to them," says Torres.

The power of cooperation and coalition

Ultimately, says Torres, nothing gets done unless a broad array of interests and groups is involved in pushing an initiative. When it comes to something as basic as setting up CASA's original Employment Center (which is now considered a national model for getting immigrant workers off the streets and into a more structured, supportive and community-friendly setting), he says nothing would ever have happened if a broad spectrum of interests—from law enforcement to the faith-based community—hadn't joined together in the push for change. "The Employment Center was such a good experience because we succeeded in getting the participation of all the interests and organizations relevant to the issue: the police, local government, other community organizations and the church. Most important was that the workers themselves were pulling together, forming their own committees, getting active. And so it was a form of coalition that was really created by the active participation of many interests."

Recently, CASA's interest in coalition-building was formalized through the Maryland Latino Coalition for Justice, which includes several organizations throughout Maryland dedicated to issues of immigrant rights. The coalition now sponsors an annual conference that bring hundreds of Latino and Latina leaders and community activists to the state capital to lobby on immigrant worker issues. CASA is a founder of the National Day Laborer Organizing Network, which also holds an annual meeting on issues of interest to immigrant workers, and which as a group is considering a nationwide union of day laborers and domestic workers to set wage standards, provide health care and organize all immigrant workers currently standing at street corners and in parking lots waiting for work. Meanwhile, CASA continues to be active both at the street level and in expanding its reach beyond the borders of Maryland. The organization is working with activists in Baltimore on developing an employment center there, even as CASA turns its attention to national efforts in support of broad immigrant and employee rights. "We now have people coming to visit us from Virginia, New Jersey, California," says Torres. It is a great way to learn from each other, he says, and to expand the realm of actors and action on a national front.

Standing up to "the cat"

But for all the success that might be ascribed to CASA, says Torres, there is one fundamental truth underpinning the progress of day laborers and domestic workers and their families in Maryland: unleashing the real power of all those directly affected. "These are people who never participated before, who never had an agenda. Now these people are going to county council

meetings, to Annapolis. I see day laborers, domestic and other low-wage workers actively participating in community action, in politics, in lobbying, giving testimony, talking to the media. This is a community that is ready, that is pushing us. To me this is the real lesson of our experience." And for those workers who used to say they sometimes felt as helpless as a mouse before a cat, learning that collective, grassroots action can lead to big change is a lesson worth repeating again and again.

September 2003