UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS OF PRECARIOUS WORKERS IN TACOMA

CITY OF TACOMA

University of Washington
Department of Environmental & Occupational Health Sciences
ENVH 600: Understanding the Needs of Precarious Workers in Tacoma
Instructor: Noah Seixas
City of Tacoma Project Lead: Sergio Flores
Report Authors: Iman Ahmed Rachel Alger Natasha Pietilia

Introduction

In partnership with the City of Tacoma's Employment Standards office (ES), this Livable City Year project seeks to address the needs of precarious workers in Tacoma. In our project, we define precarity as 'the state of having insecure employment or income,' which makes workers more vulnerable.

The City is particularly interested in learning how precarious workers engage with two newly adopted city ordinances: 1) paid family leave (PFL) and 2) minimum wage law.

These ordinances, enacted on January 1, 2018, require that employers provide a minimum wage of $12 per hour and a minimum of one hour of paid sick leave for every 40 hours worked. Both ordinances apply to all employees who work in Tacoma. These rights apply to all employees in Tacoma regardless of where the employer's headquarters are located. Additional ordinance information may be found on the City's website.

Although the Employment Standards Office has conducted outreach on these ordinances, they receive few requests for assistance from precarious workers. They believe this silence is due to systemic factors, rather than an absence of need for help.

Methods

To collect qualitative data, the City connected the student researchers to community organizations that could speak to the barriers precarious workers experience.

The City identified approximately 10 organizations and the student researchers pursued interviews with their key staff. These interviews include five questions about the most pressing issues facing precarious workers, barriers to reporting rights violations, recommendations for improving outreach, and opportunities for collaboration between community organizations and the City.

Initial Findings and Recommendations

Interviews are still being conducted, but the following table summarizes the key messages provided by interviewees.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Organization</th>
<th>Name of Organization</th>
<th>Issue addressed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rainbow Center</td>
<td>LBGTQ Communities</td>
<td>Social services and information for undocumented experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blessed Outreach Gide Center for Strong Families</td>
<td>Evangelical and Underemployed</td>
<td>Employment skills, parenting, interview skills, and low income and financial management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tacoma Community House</td>
<td>Refugees and Immigrants</td>
<td>Education, immigration, housing and employment resources, and anti-racism and anti-sexual harassment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centro Latino</td>
<td>Latino and Indigenous Communities</td>
<td>Family support, hate violence, domestic violence prevention, wellness, and cultural resources</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

These organizations report that their constituents experience: wage theft, withheld paid sick leave, physical abuse, and discrimination. It seems likely that significant numbers of rights violations occur in the construction and service industries. Workers fail to report violations for a variety of reasons, including: fear of retaliation, ignorance of their rights, and lack of trust in the government. Community organizations also seem to be ignorant of the existence of the ES and confused about violations enforcement processes.

To reduce rights violation reporting barriers and build trust, based on our interviews and research thus far, we recommend the City:

- Release targeted marketing campaigns with enforcement data
- Co-lead multilingual workers' rights trainings with trusted community organizations, being mindful of the historical, political, and institutional factors in government distrust when developing trainings
- Regularly attend community organization meetings to build trust

Consider resourcing community organization partners to bolster their work in the community.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: We would like to express greatest thanks to all of our community partners in Tacoma: the Rainbow Center, Hilltop Center for Strong Families, Tacoma Community House, Centro Latino and the Korean Women's Association. We would additionally like to thank the City of Tacoma Office of Employment standards for identifying this project and for supporting the health and safety of workers in Tacoma.

Photo Credit: Sergio Flores

Centro Latino's clients struggle to report employment rights violations. “Having the information is one thing and having the confidence that there won't be retaliation against them for saying it’s their right, are two different things.” — Centro Latino