

Preventing Exploitation of Disaster Clean Up Workers

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Amid our cities flood and other disaster response plans, we can take steps to prevent exploitation and health risks of low income day laborers brought in by temp agencies (as happened in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and the 2008 floods in downtown Cedar Rapids and Cedar Falls). Recall how in the initial aftermath of the 2008 flood, approximately 50 of the 150 flood cleanup workers housed at Cornell College ended up in the emergency room within approximately a week's time. (This was only one of the numerous temp agencies who brought in Hispanic and other low income workers to clean up Cedar Rapids businesses.) This group of day laborers was not provided tetanus shots, nor was use of safety gear mandatory until we demanded it. They worked 10-14 hr shifts, 7 days a week. (Iowa is among the states which do not have labor laws requiring companies to give workers time to rest. Keep in mind that a woman had to be resuscitated en route to the hospital.)

When disaster strikes, obviously we want to clean up our communities and get businesses and government buildings reopened as quickly as possible. Yet we can do this in a way that is not only mindful of ensuring humane treatment of day laborers, but also prevents overwhelming already stretched emergency rooms with unnecessary injuries. Some steps our churches and communities can take to prevent this include:

- **Ask city officials and business owners to inquire about labor practices before hiring a cleaning service**--this includes inquiring about the practices of the temp agencies these cleaning companies tap for bringing in out-of-state day laborers. Ask if tetanus shots are required and provided, whether wearing of safety gear is enforced, how many hours of sleep are required of workers in order to stay safe on the job and what procedure is in place to ensure adequate food/water.
- **Learn from missteps in other cities amid disaster clean up and inform city officials and business owners** (some of whom may be members of your congregation or other houses of worship in your community). Management of the temp agency I worked with claimed they were overworking laborers because of pressure and expectations by business owners for quick clean up.
- **Ask day laborers if they have received tetanus shots.** If they haven't, direct them to where free tetanus shot clinics are available in your community.
- **Ask day laborers if they are able to access their food allowances.** The company I was in contact with gave day laborers approximately \$15/day on a debit card (when and if the debit card worked) for purchasing food and beverages. Eating out is therefore not an affordable option, so most laborers wanted to purchase groceries for prepping inexpensive meals. If you are in a smaller town with a grocery that opens at 7 a.m. and closes at 10 p.m., these workers will be unable to purchase food because of long work and transport shifts. If you find that this is an issue, consider asking the grocery store manager if s/he can accommodate staying open for an extended hour so workers can purchase food, and work with the temp agency management to arrange a mutually convenient time. Also consider having your community's houses of worship take turns preparing supplemental sandwiches, tortillas, etc.

- **Be a pastoral presence on site.** Walk the cleanup areas in clerical collar and jeans, thanking the crews for their presence and for helping to resurrect your community. Pray for them.
- **Provide pastoral care and services of healing.** You will need to work with management to know best time frames for making this available and how to go about communicating this to workers. If necessary, bring in translators to assist you with prayers for healing/anointing/laying on of hands; make shift Eucharist; provide prayer beads (I went through over 100); and post a reflection in both English and Spanish from the Daily Word or other resources in a communal area where they sleep/cook/do laundry.
- **Consider providing large communal boxes of laundry soap** if you know they are staying at a location with washing machines.
- **Use the established relationships you have with workers to advocate for their health.** Some immigrants may be reluctant to go to the emergency room if they have a serious injury or work related infections. Bilingual clergy and others whom they can trust are essential, especially if workers have not been provided tetanus shots.
- **Inquire about laws to protect the exploitation of workers if you suspect unsafe labor practices are occurring.** This may include sleep deprivation (like truck drivers, this leads to increased injuries). If there aren't any such laws in your community, find someone to help change that.
- **Provide care for management of temp agencies, who may be as stressed, sleep deprived, and in need of pastoral care as their workers.** You can also provide information for them about local resources/hours of services (i.e. laundromats, grocery stores, how and when to provide spiritual care to workers), and if needed, encourage them to improve care of their employees.