

Grant hopes to put human face on day labor site

City's 'Vision into Action' funds will help Voz community outreach program

By Jennifer Anderson

The Portland Tribune, Aug 20, 2008



Day laborers wait in the December rain at Southeast Sixth Avenue and Ankeny Street for possible work. The city of Portland is providing a grant to help a day labor site reach out to the community.

Despite ongoing controversy about the city's day laborer hire site, the Portland City Council is investing another \$10,000 in the project, this time in the form of a grant that will support the site's outreach to the community through neighborhood cleanups, music, poetry, dance and theater.

[Voz Workers' Rights Education Project](#), the nonprofit that runs the site at Northeast MLK and Everett Street, will use the so-called "Vision into Action" grant from the city's Bureau of Planning for an initiative called "Creando Puentes," or "Building Bridges." The grants are intended to support some of the goals developed during the Community Visioning Project that Potter championed during his first three years in office.

The goal of the Voz grant is to build dialogue, mediation and education in the community through three strategies:

- Conducting at least six clean-ups in different neighborhoods, which will include graffiti removal, street and sidewalk cleaning and repairing and cleaning homes of low-income families.
- Creating and performing two to four scenes of "Teatro Jornalero," or day labor theater, depicting the workers' "daily struggles." The laborers will perform the scenes at public events.
- Holding a series of "Tardes culturales," or cultural events featuring music, poetry, theater, dance and painting. The events will also be fundraisers for Voz.

The goal of the outreach, Voz organizers say, is to fight the anti-immigration backlash – and the physical and verbal abuses that go with it – by kindness and education.

"Building a diverse and just society, where one is included, where many worlds may live harmoniously, requires profound gestures of kind acts, kind words and respect by and toward others," the group states

in its grant application. "It demands establishing communities where day laborers are able to exercise the same rights, fulfill the same responsibilities and enjoy the same privileges. It requires denouncing, not yielding to injustice where it crops up. It calls for the cultivation of friendship. It entails demanding the welfare of all, including those who may be seen as adversaries."

Voz is one of 12 community groups that received a [Vision into Action](#) grant of up to \$10,000 from a pool of 55 applicants. Specifically, the projects had to use innovative approaches to "realize our shared vision for the future," tap into existing community support, impact as many people as possible, and be short-term with a long-term effect.

The city's Vision into Action Coalition, led by a steering committee of 20 citizens and based in the planning bureau, handed out \$102,500 in grant funds in all, plus another \$10,000 split between 10 youth-led initiatives that are under way this summer.

Other Vision into Action grants include \$9,250 for a street-level display of black history at the Golden West Hotel in Old Town; \$10,000 to help Street Roots (a free newspaper created and distributed by the homeless) expand to the east side; \$4,599 to the Hosford Middle School girls' basketball team to modify the uniforms to the girls' Muslim beliefs; and \$8,878 for the half-acre "grow lunch garden" at Sauvie Island, which offers students a chance to grow their own produce and adults in North Portland a place to take cooking classes.

Good neighbor policy

Few of the projects are as divisive as the day labor site, which opened at Northeast Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Everett Street on June 16 with \$200,000 in city seed money.

Many oppose the city's sponsorship of the site, saying local government should not support hiring of illegal aliens. Day laborers at the site aren't asked for proof of citizenship.

While the center has drawn opposition in the blogosphere, only one person has physically protested. Tom Wenning of Southeast Portland was convicted Monday of disorderly conduct and issued a \$500 fine for blocking to the entrance to the site a day after its opening. Wenning says he's been assaulted several times by laborers as he's tried to photograph them.

Voz staff say their center is legal, and that operations are running smoothly as more and more employers are hiring workers each day. Yet many laborers still leave without work and find it easier to solicit work on the street corners, where they congregated before the site opened. There, they need not participate in the lottery system Voz runs to give each worker an equal shot at snagging the next job.

Many neighborhood and business groups, churches, unions and nonprofits – as well as the city and police – still support the site, addressing issues as they crop up through regular meetings as required by their good neighbor agreement.

"Voz recognizes that its constituency operates within the larger context of a global community," the group's organizers state in their grant application. "The increase of day laborers in Portland is the consequence of globalization and U.S. economic and political foreign policy. Like many cities, Portland has a need for temporary and unskilled workers – a need chiefly met by the growing immigrant community. According to Census figures, the Latino population in Multnomah County alone has grown by 170 percent in the past 10 years."

jenniferanderson@portlandtribune.com