

The Star-Ledger

Alliance aims to ensure labor safeguards Immigrants advocacy group strikes a deal with feds

Friday, April 06, 2007

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A Morristown immigrants resource center signed an agreement yesterday with the federal Department of Labor, pledging to work together to make sure laborers are protected by laws governing wages, overtime and child labor.

The alliance with Wind of the Spirit was "a long time in the making," said Joseph Petrecca, district director of the federal agency's wage and hour division. "They're a natural partner with the Labor Department because we're here to make sure workers are paid in accordance with federal law."

The agency will train the group's staff and the people it serves in English and Spanish, according to the agreement. The agency also will provide bilingual publications and materials describing workers' rights under federal law.

Petrecca said the agency has forged similar partnerships with community groups in Paterson and Hudson County, as well as the Archdiocese of Newark. The alliances arose from a 5-year-old national program that started with door-to-door outreach to mostly Hispanic and Asian workers, according to the agency.

Federal laws regarding the minimum wage, overtime, child labor and family leave apply to workers regardless of whether they are in the country legally, Petrecca said.

"We don't make any distinctions when we look at whether employers are complying with the law," Petrecca said. "It doesn't matter what their status is. It's not a concern of ours."

All workers may be afraid to report labor violations out of fear of being fired, Petrecca said. But immigrant workers can be especially hesitant, and working with community groups can encourage them to come forward, he said.

"They can come to us and we'll make sure these people get paid what they're supposed to get paid," he said.

The federal agency oversees companies that do more than \$500,000 in business annually, or that engage in interstate commerce. If an employer repeatedly and willfully violates federal labor laws, the department will issue penalties, Petrecca said.

Diana Mejia, executive director of Wind of the Spirit, said the alliance shows the federal agency recognizes the value of immigrants' labor.

Wind of the Spirit has helped workers recover about \$100,000 in unpaid wages in the last four years, and it is now pursuing 36 instances of unpaid wages, including seven federal cases, according to the group. All workers who come to the center are taught how to pay taxes on their earnings if they do not already do so, Mejia said.

"People trust us so it's our responsibility to clarify, to help the workers to get paid for the work they do," she said. "Having the support of the Department of Labor makes us more strong."

Last week, the group renewed a 2004 agreement with the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration, which also provides training and outreach to make sure workers are protected by federal laws.

The agreements come as Mayor Donald Cresitello is pushing for local police to be deputized by the federal

Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency. If the town's application is accepted, local police could file charges leading to deportation of illegal immigrants.

Petrecca declined to comment on that topic yesterday.

"It's not something that's within our jurisdiction," he said. "That's an issue for law enforcement."

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