

Worker center marks milestone

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After a controversial opening, facility celebrates its first anniversary

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SANTA CRUZ » After taking a challenging five years to open, the Day Worker Center of Santa Cruz County is celebrating its first anniversary.

More than 300 workers are registered with the center, and more than 500 employers have hired a worker at least once.

Program Director Mireya Gomez-Contreras said the first year has been successful.

"We've been steadily increasing our job matches on a monthly basis," she said. "We started out with 80 in April last year, we were at 180 in August and we're over 300 in March."

The Day Worker Center, a Community Action Board of Santa Cruz program, offers a safer alternative to picking up laborers in front of home improvement stores and on the street.

"We're attentive to making sure the workers are safe at the work site, that they are treated with respect and dignity and that the worker does a good job," Gomez-Contreras said. "We also provide employment support services."

The center holds occupational health and safety training, English-language learner classes and carpentry, recycling and computer workshops.

"We've been having more classes. We know we

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get a lot of benefits," said Ana Gutierrez, a worker. "Whenever we have free time, we get help."

The staff has been transparent with workers in asking them to maintain the building grounds and keep it feeling like a community.

Many neighbors in the Live Oak area opposed the opening of the center. They were concerned with traffic, crime and lower property values and thought the center would be more appropriate in a commercial area rather than a residential one near schools. Opponents rallied outside the Seventh Avenue building with signs that read "KEEP ME SAFE," "KID SAFETY NOT WORKERS" and "NO MORE TRAFFIC."

Gomez-Contreras said obtaining the county use permit should have taken about a month to submit the paperwork and to work with the planning commission, but a group called Save Our Street Live Oak complained to the Board of Supervisors, prolonging the process.

"The reality has been completely the opposite of their concerns," Gomez-Contreras said regarding traffic and noise, "to the point that some neighbors have knocked on our door and asked, 'Are you even open?' Some of the neighbors who started out feeling negative are now supporters. Close neighbors are even hiring workers."

Jim Nee lives across the street. He said he changed his mind about the center's presence in the neighborhood.

"I was worried that young single men would be hanging



KEVIN JOHNSON — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Day Worker Center staff members met at Anna Jean Cummings Park in Soquel on Sunday afternoon to celebrate the center's one-year anniversary.

out on the sidewalk, like they do at Home Depot. I was worried that they would cat call at women and harass girls who were going to the high school, just being a nuisance," he said. "That hasn't happened at all. Quite the contrary. The people who go to the Day Worker Center are mature people. They're serious."

He initially wrote letters to County Supervisor John Leopold, whose district includes Live Oak, and attended neighborhood meetings opposing the opening of the center.

"The meetings with the neighbors, they were hard because nobody liked us, nobody trusted us, everyone was trying to block the opening of the center," Gutierrez said. "They created stories, like we were bad guys, drug dealers."

But Gutierrez said that doubt motivated her.

"Instead of putting us down, it pushed us forward

to prove that we were not the type of people they thought," she said.

Nee said traffic and noise are not issues. The center does most of the job matches over the phone. However, Live Oak resident John Berg said the quietness of the center shows that a residential neighborhood is not the best location for it.

"A large crowd of workers still frequent River Street and 41st Avenue and like many day worker programs around the country, the day worker center in Live Oak is usually deserted," he said. "One can only speculate as to why the center is a failure, but many residents believe that the main reason is because it's in the wrong location."

Gomez-Contreras said that the center needed to be close to the freeway to be accessible to workers and employers and that marketing the

center is a work in progress, "just like any other business."

Since the center has opened, handyman Rodrigo Perez Valencia said he has not had a day off. He was the president of the Day Worker Committee, a leadership group involved in the development of the center and represented local laborers.

He said employers he works with through the center treat workers with more dignity.

"Our work and ourselves are more respected," he said in translated Spanish, adding that there is a big difference between being in the center and being on the street and that employers seem to be more aware of workers' needs, regarding necessities like water breaks and bathroom usage.

"I feel proud to satisfy my family's and my necessities," Perez Valencia said.