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do whatever work is feasible, Wiggins says. Today, their clients include more people who once had stable jobs and homes but are now facing unemployment and foreclosure — “people who never came to us for services before,” Wiggins says.

“We have people who say they just lost their home, but now are looking for a place to rent, but the foreclosure hurt their credit history and it’s hard to find a place to rent. It’s really tough. In the past we hardly ever had clients that owned their own home. This economic crisis is hitting really hard on the most vulnerable people. We’re the only hope for some of these folks.”

Southeast Portland’s day laborer center, which opened almost a year ago as part of the VOZ workers’ rights project, has seen the same shift. VOZ Executive Director Romeo Sosa says work has been scarce for the laborers at the site, and many of them are now in dire straits.

“Most of the day laborers ... are not getting jobs right now,” Sosa says. “They’re losing their home or their apartment. People are coming in and saying, ‘I don’t have money to pay the rent this month and I don’t know what to do.’”

Some of those workers have moved in with their friends, started selling their handmade crafts for income, or left Portland in hopes of finding work elsewhere. Others have become homeless.

“Definitely I think it’s forcing a lot of people onto the streets,” Sosa says of the local climate.

“People are really scared,” says Andrea Townsend, an organizer with Jobs With Justice. “A lot of unions are faced with renegotiating their contracts and taking cuts in pay. So the workers who are already suffering because things are costing more, they’re

losing their jobs, they’re being affected by the economic crisis generally, and then they’re having their wages and benefits decreased.”

Which has led to increased hostility from non-immigrant workers who blame immigrants for job losses.

“We’re starting to see a little pushback, a little scapegoating of immigrants,” Townsend says.

Townsend saw that division first-hand when she observed the April 15 Tea Party event in Pioneer Courthouse Square. She described the attitude at the tax protest as highly anti-immigrant. And that continues to play out as workplace raids and detentions target immigrant workers.

“Those who are the focus of those raids are also suffering from the effects of the economic crisis and also being targeted based on their documentation status,” Townsend said.

Statewide unemployment hit 12 percent in March, but in many rural counties, the numbers are even higher. Crook, Harney and Douglas Counties top the list, with rates of 18.5 percent, 17.1 percent and 16.9 percent, respectively.

The picture is even more ominous when you consider the underemployed — those who are working, but intermittently or are not earning enough to stay ahead financially.

“These are the people who, even if they’re working, they’re earning just enough money to maybe pay their rent, or their mortgage,” says Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries Commissioner Brad Avakian. “But health care, retirement, school, education, these kinds of things? They’re not even on the table anymore.”

There are no exact figures for underemployment, but Avakian says it’s generally considered to be about double the unemployment rate. In the worst-off counties, then, “It’s reasonable to assume you’re

looking at more than 40 percent underemployed.”

When so many are struggling, resentment stews.

St. Helens construction contractor Wayne Mayo, the man who wrote November’s stringent county ballot measures, said his motivation was in keeping the job market fair by halting the employment of undocumented workers.

“This is about what’s legal and not legal,” Mayo told *The Oregonian* at the time. “It’s not fair that some contractors make money on the back of slave labor, when other contractors can’t compete with them.”

Immigrant rights advocates agreed with the premise that employers should not be able to undercut regular wages by employing undocumented workers, but they argued that Mayo’s measure would only burden small businesses and foment mistrust in the community.

According to Marcy Westerling of the Rural Organizing Project, the enforcement measure was “a poor solution to genuine frustrations for updated policies at the national level.”

The ROP partnered with the Northwest Justice Project, ACLU of Oregon and a citizens’ group called Columbia County Citizens for Human Dignity to challenge the measure in court. On April 13, a Columbia County judge ruled that the measure reached beyond the county’s authority and conflicted with federal immigration law, so it could not be enforced.

“The proponents of the measure are quite right that the current immigration system in the U.S. is broken and needs reform,” says Michael Dale, a Northwest Justice Project lawyer who fought the case. “But ultimately these problems are not going to be solved piecemeal, county-by-county.”

Over the same several months, Columbia County’s unemployment rate rose to more than 14 percent, and two of its major employers closed down. Though the ballot measure itself never went into effect, the Latino community felt the pressure.

“All of a sudden (Latinos) felt like they were under a spotlight,” Sanchez said. “They couldn’t go into a store and not feel like people were staring at them ... it really created an atmosphere of fear and misunderstanding.” Some felt they couldn’t speak Spanish in public for fear their neighbors would call immigration enforcement on them.

Sanchez is a U.S. citizen, but her Mexican-born parents were undocumented until the 1980s, when President Reagan’s immigration reform granted legal status to many immigrants already in the country. (That legislation also tightened border control and stiffened penalties on employers of undocumented workers.) For that reason, Sanchez says she identifies with undocumented Latinos and families of mixed legal status.

After Mayo’s ballot measure was voted in, she became involved with Latinos Unidos para un Futuro Mejor (“Latinos United for a Better Future”), a newly-formed community group that wanted to push back against the anti-immigrant sentiment.

In February, the group organized a march through St. Helens — they called it a procession for respect and dignity. Though the organizers received some threatening phone calls, the march took place without incident.

“We were living here already,” Sanchez says. “We’ve been living here for a long time, so I think we really need to figure something out together... instead of trying to figure out who we’re going to kick out of the county, we should be trying to figure out how we can get jobs to our county in the first place.”

Though the ballot measure has been defeated and they’re not sure what to do next, LUFM is still meeting. In early April, they held a community game night and dance contest to raise money for a bus to the Salem May Day rally.

“I don’t think we’re done talking, that’s for sure,” Sanchez says. “We’re not done.”

May 1 is May Day — also known as International Workers’ Rights Day. In years past, an estimated 10,000 people have taken to Portland’s streets, although the numbers vary widely year by year. This year, organizers hope to harness some of the energy swelling out of frustration with the economy and channel it into positive change.

“The current economic crisis has galvanized working people in a way we haven’t seen since the 1930s, in part because it so clearly illustrates who benefits from our current economy and how they benefit,” says Barbara Dudley, director of the Oregon Working Families Party. “It is hard to imagine a better time to organize. Yes, people are frightened, but they are more angry than scared, and they are ready for dramatic changes.”

Marco Mejia is the Portland-area director of the American Friends Service Committee immigration program, and he works extensively with immigrant workers. Immigrant rights have been a strong theme in recent years’ May Day marches, he said, but economic justice around the globe is an important message this time.

Mejia says it’s important for people to understand “how people have been pushed to this country. Not just because they wanted to come, but because they have been pushed by the (world) economy.”

Mejia sees a positive focus around organizing now — something that had been stifled in recent years. He credits this to the new administration in Washington restoring the sense of “freedom to organize and to think differently,” which Mejia says pretty much disappeared under the Bush administration.

“There’s a lot of energy and hope,” Mejia says. “People are thinking about what to do. About how we can change things. How the community can build different communities, more in solidarity, and that’s something that we’ve been missing.”

Westerling of the Rural Organizing Project has also seen an upswell in community interest, and she says she’s concerned about steering it in the right direction.

“I feel optimistic and daunted,” Westerling says. “The people want to engage. That is rare and notable, but can we meet them where they are and find clever ways to engage them, (instead of telling them to) come to one more meeting or rally? I don’t think people want to be strident, but I do think they want concrete change.”

As one alternative form of action, ROP is helping people in St. Helens churn up a middle-school lawn to replant as a vegetable garden, which they’ll share with others in the county.

“We are using gardens as more concrete projects to talk about feeding ourselves as a community during dire times, re-working our economy, involving all ages and focusing on the enormous amount that we do have control over,” Westerling says.

Ultimately, says the NWJP’s Michael Dale, the conversation needs to be bigger — and it needs to involve the people who are not ardently anti-immigrant or passionately pro-immigrant, but somewhere in between.

“The great middle of folks, I’ve found, are people who want to be fair and want to be compassionate, and on the same token they’re concerned about ... laws not being followed, and they’re disturbed about the way the economy is going. They’re conflicted.”

But those people are often too timid to join the discussion, Dale says, because “they don’t want to be hit by a brick” from either side.

Dale also thinks most of today’s small-town tensions will take large-scale change to resolve.

“As long as you have 12 million (undocumented) people in the county that are in a subterranean economy, you’re going to have problems with worker exploitation and abuse.” Only if those people are given a shot at legal status, he says, can they “come out of the shadows and work on the books and vote with their feet if their job isn’t satisfactory ... or join a union or file a lawsuit and not be in fear of their very ability to be here.”

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— MICHAEL DALE
NORTHWEST JUSTICE PROJECT