

Business transactions begin at first light at Southwest Boulevard and Jefferson Street. Hispanic men gather at the windows of pickup trucks and vans, eager to secure work painting houses, cleaning basements or digging up backyards.

Kansas City's West Side has served as a day labor pool for at least five decades. What's different lately is that the operation at the Westside Community Action Network Center is being supervised by the Kansas City Police Department.

Some people can't fathom why police would provide a safe haven to a group that includes illegal immigrants.

"Because it works," says Chief James Corwin.

Crime is down, and the neighborhood is dramatically healthier since police started viewing the labor pool as a service instead of a nuisance.

Politicians in Washington and state capitals can talk about "no amnesty" and no help for people who are in America illegally.

But officials at the local level have to deal with realities. Police have found that the get-tough approach creates more problems than it solves.

A group of big-city police chiefs recently released a statement telling Congress that the chiefs were loath to enforce immigration laws. Investigating people's status erodes trust between police and communities, and runs afoul of laws prohibiting racial profiling. And police don't have the manpower or jail space.

Kansas City has tried getting tough. As the Hispanic population swelled in the 1990s, police coped with an untenable situation on the West Side. Thugs and drug dealers mingled with the men seeking day labor who gathered beside a liquor store on Southwest Boulevard. People drank on the street and harassed motorists and pedestrians.

Police took people to jail for minor infractions, only to see them on the corner within hours. They worked with federal immigration authorities on sweeps, but the short-lived relief wasn't worth the bitterness the crackdowns created.

Police Officer Matt Tomasic remembers a supervisor telling him the mayor had received a complaint that the entire neighborhood reeked of urine.

"Do something about it," the supervisor barked.

Tomasic and Lynda Callon, director of the Westside Community Action Network, already were

working on a new strategy. It involved harnessing the labor pool and using it to the advantage of **police** and the neighborhood.

The labor pool now operates out of the Community Action Network, which moved into a rent-free, remodeled machine shop at Southwest Boulevard and Jefferson.

Workers who behave appropriately can use bathrooms, telephones and a kitchen. Men who don't land jobs clean the center and help spruce up the neighborhood.

In a recent article he prepared for *The Police Chief*, a trade publication, Corwin said calls to 911 operators from the neighborhood dropped **by** 50 percent in the first year of the new labor pool's operation.

Everyone who uses the center has **to** be seeking work. Troublemakers can no longer hide in the crowd. **Police** worked with immigration officials **to** have the worst offenders deported.

The workers who use the center maintain an easy relationship with the two **police** officers stationed there. They provide valuable tips for **police** work.

"**Police** and residents now accept that day laborers -- documented or undocumented -- are part of the community and will most likely become long-term residents," Corwin wrote.

"This realization allowed the community **to** move toward resolving quality-of-life issues."

That's wisdom from the ground. People in higher places would do well **to** listen.

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Photo

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