



For information contact:
Amy Carroll, 212-417-3791
Dolores Schaefer, 212-417-3731

PRESS STATEMENT

FREE CIVIL LEGAL SERVICES ARE CRITICAL TO ENDING EXPLOITATION OF IMMIGRANT WORKERS

NEW YORK, July 1, 2005—Immigrant workers represent 47% of the city's labor force, doing the yeoman's share of low-paid work in dozens of service industries. Many immigrants work long hours each day, six or seven days a week, often in unsafe or substandard conditions. Thousands of workers are paid below the minimum wage, and laws governing overtime are routinely ignored.

State and federal labor laws apply to all workers, regardless of their citizenship status. Many immigrant workers are not aware of their rights under the law or how to get unpaid wages and unemployment insurance benefits.

MFY Legal Services' Workplace Justice Project currently handles over 400 cases each year—providing advice, counsel and full representation to workers who were not paid minimum wage and mandated over time, have been denied unemployment, and who face dangerous working conditions. On March 25, 2005, MFY filed a lawsuit against two Bronx supermarkets that routinely locked in cleaning workers overnight, with no means of egress in an emergency.

Over the past two years, demand for our services has increased dramatically. For every worker who calls on us for help, there are five who we are not able to serve because of lack of resources.

Legal services to defend immigrant workers' rights will not only help these hard-working future citizens get a fair deal – it will help ALL workers in the city. To the extent one group of workers is exploited, all workers suffer, and the city loses potential revenue when employers pay workers off the books.

We urge the City Council and the Mayor to give their full support to the Immigrant Opportunities Initiation, which will provide legal services for immigration and employment matters, and help immigrants get the English language skills they need to participate fully in the city's economy.

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