

# Hispanic headaches

by RON HALL / Managing Editor

*This is the final installment in our series on Hispanic labor in the green industry. Our look at this important fact and facet of green industry life began in October, with a look at the growing reliance on Hispanic labor. Part II, in November, examined the network available to help find documented aliens. But realists that we are, we know there are always hitches, glitches and hoops to jump through to make the system work to your benefit. And so, we bring you Part III.*

*We don't plan to say goodbye to this issue, either. Many of our readers have strong opinions on whether this trend is good or bad for the green industry. Trends also have a way of changing on a moment's notice, and we expect to update our readers on all the important developments as they happen.*

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*The green industry's eagerness to employ growing numbers of Hispanic workers doesn't come without challenges and pitfalls.*

Landscape architect Frank Mariani says immigration whisked away 55 of his Mexican workers this past fall, leaving him understaffed.

"We had 200 I-9 forms (required for each employee to establish work eligibility) and not a single violation," says Mariani who operates one of the largest, full-service landscape companies in the Chicago area. "Some of the people they took, I was shocked. Some of the people that stayed, I was equally shocked."

That "visit" by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) highlights the most dramatic challenge facing employers that rely on seasonal Hispanic labor. It's hardly the only one though.

What about language? Many newly arrived Hispanic workers don't speak English. Some can't read, not even their native Spanish.



Grover: provide language training.



Mariani: shocked by INS removal of documented workers.

"The language barrier is something that we did not want to subject ourselves to dealing with, but especially we did not want to subject our clients to dealing with it" admits Robert Grover with Northwest Landscape Industries, Portland, OR. But, in 1990 NWI began employing Mexican laborers anyway.

"At first we tried to encourage our supervisors

to learn Spanish. That did not seem to be effective," says Grover. "In reality, to survive in the U.S. it's important to be able to speak English. We've spent our resources in either providing translation services to those folks who can't speak functional English. Or to help, encourage and provide opportunities for them to work on their English speaking skills."

**Who speaks the language?**

Even so, NWI, like most companies reporting success with Hispanic labor, has a key person, sometimes several, that speak both languages well. In

NWI's case it's an assistant supervisor/trainer.

Michelle Underdahl serves as the human resource manager for Arteka Corp., Eden Prairie, MN. With a Cuban heritage and a firsthand knowledge of both the Spanish language and Latin culture, Underdahl joined the Arteka team four years ago, several years after it hired its first Mexican workers.

Her company provides incentives for non-English speaking employees to learn English. These incentives include money and also an opportunity for a better-paying position.

Several of Arteka's Mexican workers, in fact, have improved their English and job skills enough to become foremen. But the client contact, to this point anyway, remains at the next level, with a job superintendent.

**Training an issue**

Training is obviously tied to language.



**Underdahl: incentives for those who learn English.**

## Hispanic labor supply to shrink?

A bill aimed at reducing illegal immigration, and also reducing the access of legal immigrants to welfare, was signed into law this past September. The bill:

- ▶ provides for stronger border enforcement, adding 1,000 border patrol agents per year for five years, bring the total from 5,175 in 1996 to almost 10,000 by the year 2000.
- ▶ requires the Immigration and Naturalization Service to build a 14-mile fence on the U.S.-Mexican border south of San Diego. It also increases penalties for smuggling aliens into the U.S. and for using false documents to obtain U.S. jobs or welfare assistance.
- ▶ adds 1,200 INS investigators agents who inspect U.S. work places for unauthorized workers, and apprehend and deport criminal aliens.
- ▶ introduces a pilot telephone verification program to enable employers to verify the status of newly hired workers. However, participation in the verification program is voluntary.
- ▶ provides incentives for states to develop counterfeit-resistant driver's licenses and birth certificates.
- ▶ makes it easier for employers to defend themselves against suits from job applicants who believe that they were discriminated against by employers checking their legal status. They now must prove that the employer intended to discriminate.
- ▶ expands and strengthens restrictions on the access of legal immigrants to welfare benefits. Non-U.S. citizens were barred from Food Stamp assistance and Supplemental Security Income. The law left it up to states to decide whether to permit legal immigrants to participate in Medicaid, medical assistance for the poor.

At Arteka, all training materials, including handbooks and safety manuals are translated into Spanish. "Everything that we have is in English and Spanish," says Underdahl.

Adds Randy Ferrari, vice president of operations Minor's Landscape Services, Fort Worth, TX: "The moment a Mexican worker comes into the door they are given an application that is done in Spanish. Then we have an HR (human resources) assistant that is Hispanic that interviews and documents that employee. From that point everything they see and do in the company is done in Spanish—policy manuals, training videos. All meetings are done in English and in Spanish."



**Ferrari: company proficient in Spanish too.**

(LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT magazine turned up a smattering

of Spanish-language training material, including some excellent information from the Associated Landscape Contractors of America [ALCA]. Some industry suppliers provide Spanish-language operations manuals and labels also. Generally, the industry needs help here though.)

**Getting to work**

Transportation to and from your golf course, company headquarters or job sites can be a big problem too. Many Hispanic workers don't have drivers licenses. Chapel Valley Landscape, Woodbine, MD, is miles west of Washington D.C. and



**Woolman: worker transportation a problem.**

Baltimore. About 90 percent of its front-line workforce is Hispanic including Mexicans, Salvadorans, Nicaraguans and Puerto Ricans. Most live at least 45 minutes from Chapel Valley offices. To get to work, employees depend on other employees. Often they have to leave before daybreak to catch their rides. "The key to that is good communication with your staff," says Deonne Woolman of Chapel Valley.

*The U.S. Census Bureau says the migration is changing the face of the U.S. where, by the year 2050, one in four people will be of Hispanic heritage.*

Arteka's Underdahl says her company provides van transportation to and from work for those workers that have no other way to work. As the workforce has become established, fewer need the service though, she says.

But even if a Hispanic worker has a driver's license, the employee often can't afford vehicle insurance. Grover of Northwest Landscape Industries says his company established a rapport with a local insurance agent who often can help these individuals get insurance.

"A worker can't go very much up the wage scale unless he has a license," says Grover.

**Challenges galore**

Employee housing can be an issue too. Sometimes workers maintain households and families in Texas or Mexico, and need housing during their seasonal employment.

How about health benefits? Workers, even the best and strongest get sick and have accidents. Unemployment compensation? Laws are different in different states.

Even assuming a green industry firm can attract welcome Hispanic help in the first place, how can it retain it from season to season? There are no guarantees.

"We do still struggle with some turnover," admits Chapel Valley's Woolman, "But we do have about a 90 percent return rate after our 10 to 12 week layoff season." She attributes some of this success to a benefits package the company provides these workers.

Farrari of Minor's Landscape says his company tries to keep good workers by helping them move up the career ladder. "I think this sets the pace for the other employees. When they see success happening in the company, they can see that they can move forward and develop in the company too," says Farrari.

Given these hurdles, it would seem that Hispanic workers would not be in great demand. But they are. And they're likely to remain so, at least as long as low unemployment in many parts of the U.S. makes labor, any labor, scarce.

**Here to stay**

But, Hispanic workers are more visible for a more obvious reason too: there are, quite simply, more of them in the United States. Immigration to the U.S., both legal and illegal, soared this past decade. The impact was most noticeable in California, New York, Texas, Florida, New Jersey and Illinois.

*For the smaller contractor, the burden of training, transporting and, sometimes even, housing Hispanic workers can be backbreaking.*

The U.S. Census Bureau says the migration is changing the face of the U.S. where, by the year 2050, one in four people will be of Hispanic heritage.

Take Chicago, for instance, where Frank Mariani's company is active. The Latino Institute released a detailed portrait of immigrants in the Chicago area in 1995 that said there were 470,000 immigrants living there, the largest group (278,000)

being from Mexico. From this pool of people comes about 48 percent of the area's "groundskeepers and gardeners."

Sizable green industry operations like Mariani's or like Arteka, Chapel Valley, Minor's and NWI can justify having somebody on their staffs, somebody bilingual, to deal with these matters.

Otherwise, the burden of documenting, training, transporting and, sometimes even, housing seasonal workers falls to the owner or manager. It's a big load, especially considering that an owner/operator is generally also responsible for selling his firm's services and overseeing production.

But, the biggest fear most green industry operations have in hiring Hispanic workers is what happened to Mariani, and many others like him—it's of suddenly losing them again.

The INS has stepped up its efforts to find and deport so-called "illegal" or undocumented workers following passage of last year's new immigration law. (See accompanying article.)

It means that an employer, regardless of how carefully they scrutinize workers' documents always risks the possibility of being left with contracted services to perform or jobs to complete, with nobody to do it.

Most employers admit they're not experts at counterfeit papers. But, it's something they'll have to get better at.

"It's important to educate yourself on what documentation is appropriate and what is not," says NWI's Gover. "There is a lot of false documentation out there. We scrutinize documents. We turn away people that have bogus documents."

Employers with less experience in hiring foreign-born employees aren't as sure they can tell real documents from manufactured ones. Nor apparently are they as concerned considering their need for help.

"If the INS came in my front door, I would make sure my guys got out the back door," says another Chicago-area landscape contractor who asked that his name not be used. **LM**