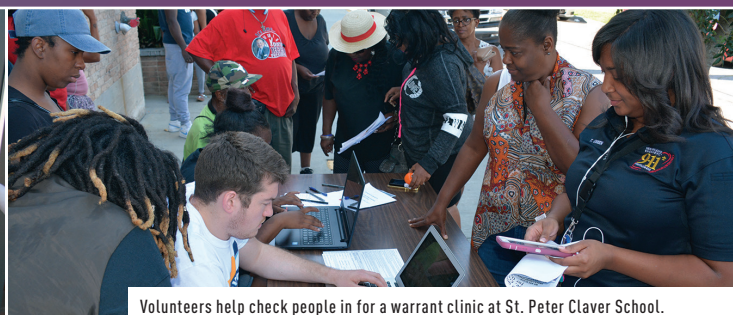




NOWCRJ volunteer helps out at a Stand with Dignity warrant clinic.



Volunteers help check people in for a warrant clinic at St. Peter Claver School.



By working in the community, NOWCRJ members are a catalyst for change in New Orleans.

# Hope for Excluded and Overlooked Workers in New Orleans

BY BETH GRIFFIN

Born in the dizzying **aftermath of Hurricane Katrina**, the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice (NOWCRJ) a CCHD-funded group, operates at the intersection of worker justice and rapidly growing movements that **promote racial justice, criminal justice reform, and immigrant rights.**

“Our holistic approach is about dignity and liberation, not just jobs. We look at the whole person and what’s important to them,” says Jacob Horwitz, NOWCRJ interim director and longtime organizer.

NOWCRJ began as a voice for excluded and overlooked workers. “Communities of color were pitted against each other by contractors who were rebuilding the city”

after the hurricane, says Saket Soni, the organization’s founding executive director, who now leads the National Guestworker Alliance. “Black longtime residents couldn’t get work on construction jobs near their homes because a maze of subcontractors found it more convenient and profitable to bring immigrant workers from outside.”

Some contractors, continued Saket, began to replace the inexpensive

undocumented workers with immigrant guest workers whose visas bound them to a single employer. The new workers, already in debt after paying recruitment fees, “were essentially indentured,” Jacob says, describing the labor turnover as “a race to the bottom.” Jobs that had paid \$12 per hour to mostly black workers before the hurricane were filled afterward by undocumented workers who earned \$10 an hour, and then by guest workers who earned \$6 an hour.

Early interactions among black New Orleanians and immigrants were marked by tension as a result, fueled by misplaced blame. In addition, some were concerned that construction companies were deliberately using the storm cleanup as an excuse to lower labor standards.

Each group of workers also faced unique challenges. Saket says conditions for black people in New Orleans are emblematic of

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”

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LETTER FROM



THE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends,

Most people I know react to getting a speeding ticket with rueful embarrassment.

It's a reminder of distracted driving, or perhaps the unintended result of approaching a long, empty stretch of straight road on a perfect spring day. Regardless of how it happens, the result is generally minor: a fine to be mailed in, or at most, an inconvenient court appearance, hefty fine, and maybe penalty points. These consequences become an expensive reminder to obey the posted speed limit, but they are rarely a life-altering experience.

It's very different for those living in poverty, as you can read in this issue of Helping People Help Themselves. Without money to pay the fine, or the ability to leave work to appear in court, someone living in poverty might not respond to the summons. The unpaid fine multiplies and is further compounded by contempt of court citations for missed court dates. The person's driver's license is suspended. Sometimes a person cannot get a job without a clean, valid license, so employment opportunities become limited. If the offender continues to drive—to work, to school, to medical appointments, to the store—he or she fears being stopped for a traffic infraction. At that point, a computer check will alert the police officer about the driver's suspended license, outstanding fines, and warrants. Invariably, the individual is arrested. Without the ability to pay the fines, the jailed driver may lose employment and become homeless in short order.

Members of the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice (NOWCRJ), a CCHD-funded group, were among the 30,000 New Orleanians with outstanding warrants related to minor infractions. The NOWCRJ helped organize two Saturday warrant clinics on church property, not in courtrooms where people might fear arrest. More than 3,000 people lined up to speak to a municipal or traffic court judge, and most had their warrants lifted and contempt fees waived. One of the warrant clinic participants told us a stigma was lifted from his shoulders. He landed a well-paying job for which he could never have qualified during the 14 years he drove without a license.

NOWCRJ advocates for excluded and overlooked workers, including low-income black residents with deep roots in Louisiana, and immigrants in danger of being exploited. Through the group's work, black and immigrant members link their struggles and work for improved conditions for all workers. CCHD is proud to support their tireless efforts.

Thank you for keeping CCHD in your prayers. I am grateful for your ongoing support.

Sincerely,



**RALPH McCLOUD**

*Director, Catholic Campaign for Human Development*

WHAT IS CCHD?



Through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholics and friends of CCHD across the country help poor and low-income Americans to help themselves and their communities out of poverty.

Since 1970, the CCHD has contributed over \$300 million to more than 8,000 low-income led, community-based projects that strengthen families, create jobs, build affordable housing, fight crime, and improve schools and neighborhoods. CCHD requires that projects develop community leadership and participation so that their solutions to poverty will be long-lasting and effective, and so that CCHD's investment in people will help break the cycle of poverty. CCHD also educates Catholics about the causes of poverty and seeks to build solidarity between impoverished and affluent persons.



**AN INITIATIVE OF THE  
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*More than 46 million Americans  
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Photos courtesy of the New Orleans Workers Center for Racial Justice.



➔ Continued from page 1

those across the southern region of the country and increasingly elsewhere in the United States. “African American workers are either locked out of work by structural inequality or barriers to employment such as discrimination and criminalization, or they are locked into the worst segments of the low-wage industries,” he says.

Meanwhile, “immigrants are not locked out so much as locked into exploitative conditions,” Saket says. “Adding to the problem is the constant threat of deportation. Immigrant workers leave home in the morning not sure they will return to see their kids that evening.”

Local and immigrant construction workers began to encounter each other at street corners where day laborers waited for employment. Jacob describes competition and rough interactions among the hopeful employees, punctuated by police intervention called in by owners of local stores. In 2006, the nascent NOWCRJ began having conversations with workers at day laborer corners throughout the greater New Orleans metro area. Each corner group then sent representatives to an organizing meeting for what became the Congress of Day Laborers, also known as Congreso De Jornaleros. The Congreso holds weekly meetings for more than 300 immigrant workers and their families and continues to play an active role in addressing issues that affect immigrants.

NOWCRJ is now a multidisciplinary center that provides leadership training and advances an agenda of racial justice and economic justice. “We support people who are directly affected to build skills and capacity to take collective action to change conditions in their workplace or community,” Jacob says.

For example, NOWCRJ worked persistently to ease occupancy regulations at the Housing Authority of New Orleans. Stand with Dignity, a project of NOWCRJ, won a policy shift that forbids automatic exclusion of potential public housing tenants with criminal records. In New Orleans, nearly one in four households receives rental assistance. The city’s per-capita incarceration rates, already the nation’s highest, disproportionately affect the city’s African American community. But under the new policy, won by NOWCRJ, only two

groups are now barred from public housing: (1) those who are on the lifetime registry for sex offenders and (2) those who have been convicted of making methamphetamine on public housing property. For all others seeking accommodation, a conviction only triggers further review before a determination is made.

With advocacy from NOWCRJ, the New Orleans Police Department also changed its immigration policy and agreed it would not question individuals about their immigration status, share information or databases with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), or participate in immigration enforcement or raids unless ICE or another federal agency has provided a criminal warrant for an arrest and requires local assistance.

NOWCRJ has addressed a growing tide of anti-immigrant sentiment both by spearheading economic empowerment projects and by supporting individuals who need protection. For example, seafood workers on the Gulf Coast are largely immigrant women from Mexico. With help from NOWCRJ, a group of crawfish-processing workers within the Walmart supply chain escaped a forced labor camp, exposed conditions there, and won back wages and legal protection to remain in the United States.

Meanwhile, two hugely successful warrant clinics organized by NOWCRJ’s Stand with Dignity project have helped more than 1,500 people reduce fines and eliminate the threat of arrest. Thirty thousand people in New Orleans reportedly have outstanding arrest warrants for missed court dates, minor offenses, or unpaid traffic fines. Outstanding warrants are a permanent obstacle to getting a driver’s license or automobile insurance. Some people without the money to pay the accumulated fees choose to continue driving without a valid license or insurance.

The Stand with Dignity warrant clinics were legal proceedings, overseen by municipal and traffic court judges, that were held on Saturdays at Corpus Christi Epiphany Church and St. Peter Claver School. More than 3,000 people signed up for an opportunity to tell their story to a judge outside a traditional courtroom and without fear of arrest. Most had their

warrants lifted and contempt fees waived but were still responsible for going to court to address other fees and pending charges. NOWCRJ plans to continue holding warrant clinics twice a year while advocating for changes to the law that would eliminate warrants for minor nonviolent offenses and give police the option to issue a summons instead of arresting a person caught driving with a suspended license.

Before holding the clinics, Stand with Dignity first conducted outreach and education programs, similar to voting rights drives, to let people know about the program. “It was a transformative individual action that became a collective experience,” Saket says. As a result, many participants joined Stand with Dignity.

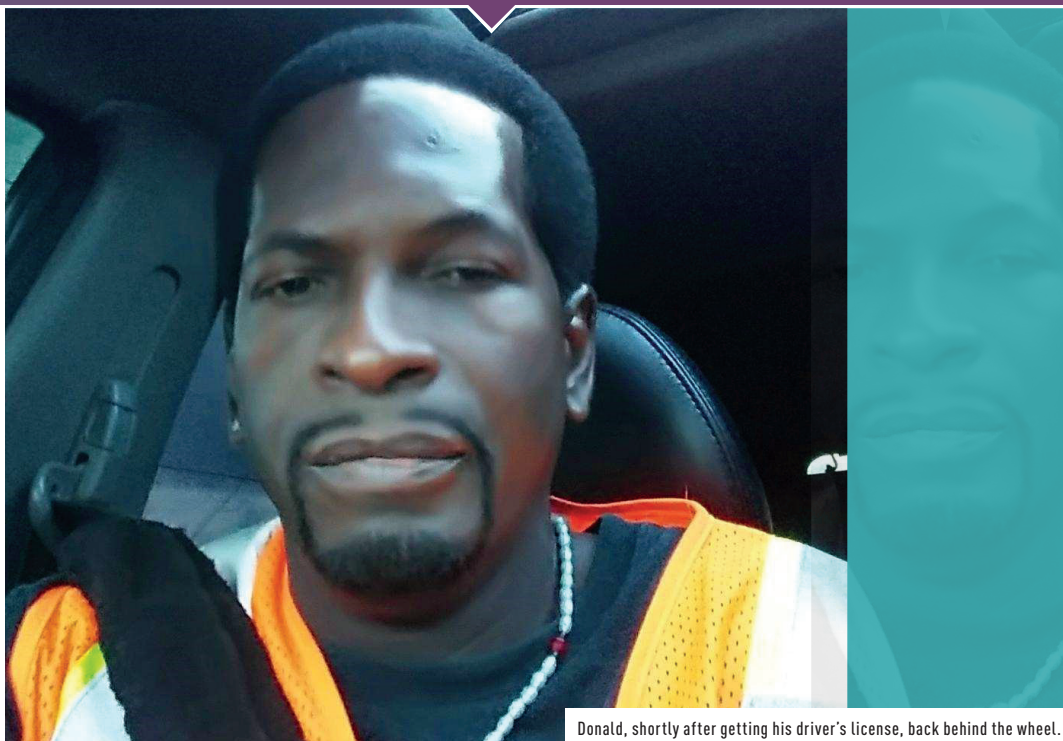
Jacob says NOWCRJ “cares deeply about supporting its members, lifting up their voices, and creating a platform for them to strategize and win actual changes.”

More than ten years after it began, NOWCRJ has become a catalyst organization that supports the growth and development of member-led groups, Jacob says. These groups include ongoing internal programs such as the Congress of Day Laborers, Stand with Dignity, and the legal and policy department, as well as the National Guestworker Alliance, a separate national membership organization founded by NOWCRJ to support immigrant guest workers who were being trafficked and exploited on the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina.

Jacob says, “While conditions have changed dramatically since its founding, the organizing lessons from NOWCRJ’s early days after Hurricane Katrina are more relevant than ever.” The unemployment rate among black New Orleans residents remains above 40 percent, and arrests of immigrants have increased 500 percent in the past year alone, he says.

“Black and immigrant member leaders [of NOWCRJ] have identified common enemies and surfaced common goals,” he concludes. “They have linked their struggle to win protection from arrest and family separation as well as for good jobs for both communities. Together they continue to build a powerful movement for dignity.”





Donald, shortly after getting his driver's license, back behind the wheel.

## Meet Donald

**“**I'm a walking, talking miracle!" Donald Anderson Jr. is a self-described "free bird" now that he has a valid driver's license for the first time in 14 years.

Donald, a heavy equipment operator, lost his license years ago when he was caught speeding in New Orleans and could not take time off from work to go to court. The initial fine was compounded by contempt of court citations and more fines. As he followed welding jobs to Texas, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, Donald owned a succession of cars and collected more tickets and fines for unlicensed driving.

"Mind you, it made me a great driver. I'd set the cruise control and get in the right-hand lane. I can laugh about it now, but if a police car came alongside, I wouldn't make eye contact," he says.

"They don't target rich neighborhoods, and I knew if I got pulled over, I'd be jailed, everything I owned would be on the street, I'd lose my job and be homeless," Donald explains.

Clearing the backlog was surely impossible, he thought, because he was helping to support his growing family while

living "right above the poverty level, one paycheck away from eviction," he says.

When he heard that Stand with Dignity's first warrant clinic would be held at a Catholic school, not a courtroom, he says he signed up "to get my business straight." The judge dismissed his Louisiana fines, and he paid a license reinstatement fee.

"I had the stigma lifted from my shoulders," Donald says. He is still responsible for fines and fees in Texas and New Jersey, but he has since been able to schedule monthly payments for those outstanding debts. Best of all, because he got his license back, Donald was able to get a new job as a heavy equipment operator and save money to move from a rented room to an apartment.

"Links and chains are being formed and mended in my life," he says. "Stand with Dignity lit a fire under my feet. I don't want to just get my license and head on with my life. I've got to become a part of this and tell my story!" So Donald joined Stand with Dignity and was elected a spokesperson by fellow members.

"I want to lead by example and help others in worse situations," he explains. ☸

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