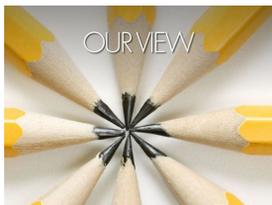


# Our View: Two years of advocating for workers' rights

IOW 11 p.m. CST November 13, 2014



The topic of workers' rights goes back ages, so it seems incredible that it was only two years ago this month that the board of directors for the Center for Worker Justice of Eastern Iowa formed.

According to its mission statement, the nonprofit, community-based organization — thought to be the first of its kind in Iowa — “unites low-wage workers in Eastern Iowa across race and immigration status to achieve social and economic justice through education, organizing, direct services and community alliances. The Center for Worker Justice seeks to improve Eastern Iowa communities by coordinating projects to address injustices in areas such as: workplace conditions, civil rights, access to education, and the need for

affordable housing.”

In the past two years, the CWJ has brought together hundreds of low-wage workers of diverse origins through surveys, meetings — which are often conducted in English, Spanish, French and Arabic — leadership workshops and forums and put into action steps to address their needs. According to a CWJ news release, the group over the past two years has:

- Recovered more than \$7,500 in unpaid wages with local factory and service workers.
- Educated hundreds of local residents in workshops about wage payment rights, workplace health and safety, civil rights, health care, tenants' rights, immigration reform and more.
- Sponsored local immigration reform events and testified before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee on immigration reform.
- Held a public forum where low-wage workers testified about job-related concerns and proposals to officials from the U.S. Department of Labor, state legislators, and academic, labor and faith leaders.
- Recruited members to serve on the Human Rights Commission and Police Citizens Review Board and met with dozens of local and state officials to discuss low-wage workers' concerns.
- Launched a grassroots campaign to establish a local community ID program, which county officials are working to implement in 2015.

CWJ Executive Director Misty Rebik said she is especially proud of the progress of the community ID, an idea she said was conceived as a solution to a problem by center members even before the CWJ officially began. The IDs would be available to any county resident, but would be especially helpful for those residents who lack the documentation needed for such common activities as cashing their pay checks, renting an apartment, purchasing medication or showing to a police officer after reporting a crime. More than 700 people already have signed up through the CWJ, stating that they would like a card when they become available.

Rebik said that during a meeting last week in which the progress of the IDs was discussed, CWJ members were ecstatic.

“All of them were just beaming with pride because so many people didn't think we could do this,” Rebik said. “The public commitment has made us so proud.”

Rebik said she has been contacted by groups and cities across the state wanting information about starting a similar ID program in their community.

Rebik said the group will focus heavily on the issue of wage theft in the next year.

A 2012 Iowa Policy Project study cited wage theft — which can include non- or under-payment, the confiscation of tips or unauthorized employer deductions — as a serious problem, estimating that low-wage Iowa workers lose out on \$600 million annually because of it.

“We want to win changes in the workplace,” Rebik said. “We'll be focusing on organizing workers in those sectors such as hospitality and factories and really empower workers to take on their employers and demand a job with dignity.”

Rebik said they want to emphasize five key rights: right to organize; right to livable wage; right to be paid on time and with a pay stub; right to know your schedule; and the right to work in a place without discrimination.

The Center for Worker Justice also plans to host cultural solidarity events in the next year such as language workshops and citizenship clinics.

We look forward to seeing the progress the CWJ makes in the coming years. We also hope their work along with community allies will spur employers to action and Iowa lawmakers to change the law and make it more difficult for unscrupulous employers to take advantage of their more vulnerable employees.

### Person of the Year 2014

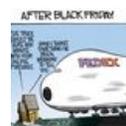
Since 1997, the Press-Citizen Editorial Board has recognized the individual or group who has had the greatest impact on the greater Iowa City area over the previous year. We are now accepting nominations for our Person of the Year 2014.

Send nominations to [opinion@press-citizen.com](mailto:opinion@press-citizen.com). Nominations should include the name of the person you want to nominate as well as a short explanation (up to 250 words) of why that person should be recognized as Person of the Year.

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