



# The Times

## Immigrants finding opportunities scarce

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**BY CARMEN CUSIDO**

Jose Ortiz's hours were cut back to three days a week installing carpets. But he's happy to have a job, considering many of his friends and neighbors have lost theirs.

Wuilian Fabian, 24, of East Windsor, has been out of a job for two months. It's the longest he's been unemployed since moving to East Windsor from Guatemala in 2001.

America, 46, who asked that her last name not be printed, may move to North Jersey to find work there. After coming here illegally from Peru a year ago, she's been out of a job for nearly a month.

"A lot of agencies are looking for real documents," said America, who speaks English, which she said may help her find a job in the United States. "It's harder to find jobs in Peru. Younger people are favored."

The year-long recession is hurting undocumented workers across Mercer County. Some have lost jobs, and many more are sending less money home. But some have opted to stay in the area to see if the economy improves, or if President-elect Barack Obama's administration may implement policies to legalize undocumented immigrants.

The trend is that fewer people are coming to Mercer County towns like Hightstown and East Windsor, but not that more people are returning to their home countries, David Abalos, a visiting professor at Princeton University and a community activist, has observed.

"People may think twice before coming, especially when you have to pay such heavy rates to coyotes," said Abalos, referring to smugglers who bring migrants over the U.S. border. "People can't afford that, especially when there's no possibility of having a full-time job."

Foreign-born people make up 28 percent of the state's work force, according to a report released in December by the Rutgers Eagleton Institute of Politics Program on Immigration and Democracy.

The report, titled "Destination, New Jersey: How Immigrants Benefit the State Economy," makes the argument that the state's economy is dependent upon immigrant workers who bring in 23 percent of the earnings statewide and own nearly 20 percent of the state's businesses.

At Cambio Express, a downtown Hightstown store that sells phone cards and money orders, Paulo Galan has seen a drop in sales for both, beginning this past summer.

"A lot of our clients are out of work. Those that came twice a month to send \$300 to their families are now coming once a month and sending \$100," said Galan, an employee there.

America, the undocumented immigrant who lives in Hightstown, used to send \$300 weekly. Now she can barely scrape together \$100 a month to send to family since being laid off from an internet-based flower company where she worked doing packaging and processing out of a warehouse in Cranbury.

Undocumented workers who have been in the country or the region for a few years may ride out the economic storm, but those without deep roots may opt to go home, said Janice Fine, a labor studies professor at Rutgers University. There's been a documented decrease in immigration as the country has moved into recession, she said.

"Low-wage immigrant workers are very sensitive to the fluctuating fortunes of the American economy, that's always been true. But, certainly now, we see a combination of a financial crisis that the American middle class has much less disposable income and less ability to employ immigrants in some of the kinds of work that they've typically been doing," including landscaping, domestic work, and child and senior care services.

Fine said the service industry is extremely exposed because people don't go out to eat as often. And foreign-born Latinos who have been employed in commercial and residential construction in the state and across the country are also affected because construction is an area hit hard by the financial crisis. Even in the informal economy, the largely Latino day laborers who are picked up by contractors to do small jobs for homeowners are less likely to find work.

Most undocumented workers, Fine said, are facing the twin phenomenon of an economic downturn combined with workplace raids both state and country-wide.

"The combo will make people think twice about coming to the country. It may drive some people to return home," Fine said. Under Operation Return to Sender -- a sweep of immigrants who are in the country illegally conducted by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency -- there were more than 1,585 immigrant violators who were arrested between May 26, 2006, and May 1, 2007, in New Jersey. ICE reported more than 10,000 referrals from New Jersey law enforcement agencies of people that could be deported between September 2007 and January 2008.

There also are fewer employers sponsoring their foreign-born workers to get visas or extend their employment status, said Princeton immigration attorney Ryan Stark Lilienthal.

But he said many professional and blue-collar immigrant workers are waiting to see what happens when Obama takes office.

Other foreign workers who are affected by a weakened economy are those with H-1B visas.

H-1B work-authorization is strictly limited to employment by the sponsoring employer and is open to individuals with at least a bachelor's degree in fields like engineering, mathematics, physical sciences, social sciences, medicine and health, education, law and accounting, according to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, which issues the visas. The current annual cap on the H-1B category is 65,000, according to the government agency's website.

Jessica Escala, general consul of Ecuador in New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Delaware, said her office has not seen a high demand of people wanting to return to Ecuador because of the economic downturn.

"People still come. The last thing people lose is hope, and they still believe in the American dream," said Escala, adding there are about 600,000 Ecuadorians in New Jersey and close to 200,000 in Pennsylvania.

Still, the Ecuadorian government has facilitated the return to the South American nation, implementing its "Plan Retorno" in 2008, under which Ecuadorian citizens' debts will be exonerated and they will have lines of credit open to finance their businesses upon return.

But others are looking to return to their home countries.

Rosa Maria De Mora, consul general of Guatemala in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Connecticut, said a few people started to trickle in around September, saying they want to return to their country because they don't have jobs here.

"They ask for documents to return home," said De Mora, adding that there are approximately 300,000 Guatemalans living in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and Pennsylvania.

The Guatemalan-born Fabian had found a job in Cranbury building walls to ship out to casinos in early December, but was let go after two weeks.

"I usually send money for Christmas. This year I couldn't because of the economy," Fabian said. He last sent \$150 in November.

But Fabian, an aspiring psychologist who's learning English and earning his GED diploma, is staying put. He is hoping the Obama administration will open a door for undocumented immigrants to be legalized.

"If that doesn't happen," he said, "I will return to my country."