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by Jerry Frank

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<https://riograndeguardian.com/frank-valley-interfaiths-living-wage-campaign-part-two/>



I vividly recall a conversation with a parishioner in McAllen in 1998. After two years of working at the college under a company which the college had contracted with to provide

their security personnel, he was making \$5.75 an hour.

Health and other benefits were non-existent. He had been promoted to sergeant with the promise of a pay raise once a new contract was signed with the college. Even though he never arrived late to work nor missed a day of work, the pay raise and the promise of one week's vacation never happened.

So Valley Interfaith began to research the plight of contractual laborers. Our research showed that construction workers employed by companies under contract for public works were earning much less in the Valley than their counterparts in other areas of Texas.

Sixty-three percent of the Davis-Bacon prevailing wage rates for differing specifications of construction labor in the Valley paid less than \$7.00 an hour, whereas no category of prevailing wage rates in either Bexar or Galveston/Houston counties paid less than \$7.00 an hour.

More specifically, the average wage for all categories of construction work amounted to \$6.27 per hour in Hidalgo and Cameron counties, \$13.53 an hour in Bexar and \$16.36 in Galveston/Houston. Furthermore, in contrast to areas like San Antonio and Houston, Rio Grande Valley construction workers received neither medical nor retirement benefits.

Perry Vaughn, president of Associated General Contractors, Inc., in the Valley area, readily acknowledged that the loss of skilled workers because of low pay scales and the consequent need to be continuously retraining workers to fill the vacancies was a major obstacle facing his industry.



VIF then adopted a new course of action to target publicly contracted firms in Brownsville and Cameron County. In 2007, the City of Brownsville (including the Public Utilities Board) and Cameron County became the first public entities to require contractors and their subcontractors to pay their workers \$8.00 per hour.

The county's resolution stated: "All prime and subcontractors will explicitly include a minimum wage of \$8.00 per hour for all full time and part time employees hired by prime and subcontractors who bid for and perform all types of contracted work for the County."

Later, Texas Southmost College and Brownsville ISD passed similar policies at \$8.50 per hour and immediately began to enforce them. TSC Board Chairman David Oliveira said, "Our decision will have a ripple effect throughout the local economy because general and subcontractors will have to agree to pay their workers a minimum of \$ 8.50 per hour if they want to bid for a college contract. It will affect every contract we award and we just completed a \$68 million bond issue and we've also taken on

some other projects. It's a great trend and we are happy to see it. However, the current level of \$8.50 isn't the true living wage for a family of four, which is closer to \$10.50. But we will be working hard to get up to the true living wage."

The BISD resolution stated: "The Brownsville Independent School District will require that all contractors and their sub-contractors pay a minimum wage of \$8.50 per hour for all full time and part time employees hired by the contractors and sub-contractors who bid and perform all types of contracted work for the District. Passed and adopted this 17th day of August, 2010."

In conclusion, VIF believes that public taxes shouldn't be used to pay citizens less than poverty level wages. In doing so, local governments become accomplices to the exploitation of their own citizens. We believe that the implementation of a living wage in paying workers' salaries and in contracts over \$25, 000 can be a key factor in building healthier families, a stronger workforce and a good economy for everyone in the Valley.

Editor's Note: The main image accompanying this guest column shows the column's author, the Rev. Jerry Frank, a longtime Valley Interfaith leader. The above column is the second in a two-part series. Click [here](#) to read Part One.

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