

Faith Leaders, Lawyer: Wage Theft Rampant at Local Cold Storage Facilities

By: *Mitchell Ferman* - January 18, 2020

McALLEN — They keep hearing the same stories: Workers in cold storage facilities in McAllen and the surrounding area are routinely paid less than the minimum wage.

“Wage theft is an epidemic in the Valley,” said Kathryn Youker of Texas RioGrande Legal Aid. She added: “People are getting robbed. It’s our neighbors, our family members.”

Youker on Friday was joined by faith leaders Elisa Alfaro of Holy Spirit parish in McAllen and **Valley Interfaith** and Dayra Campos of San Juan Diego Church, where they compared working conditions at some local cold storage facilities to being treated “like slaves.”

They called on the city of McAllen to ensure no company that pays workers under the minimum wage, or is guilty of wage theft, receive incentives from the city. They also called on the city to crack down on wage theft and labor abuses. A substantive meeting with McAllen Economic Development Corporation President Keith Patridge has already commenced, they said, and a meeting with McAllen City Manager Roel “Roy” Rodriguez is expected next week.

“We have heard stories from our church, who have earned \$4 or \$6 an hour,” Alfaro said. She added that employers have been “forcing workers to work long hours without overtime pay.”

The main storage facilities in question are at the McAllen produce terminal on West Military Highway, where trucks weave in and out of loading docks, moving limes, nopales, tomatoes and much more. The produce terminal has not been immune to criminal behavior.

A company operating out of the terminal, Vermex Produce, was hit with federal sanctions in 2018, which all but ended the company’s time at the terminal. [Previously](#), a federal judge ordered the same company to pay \$120,000 after financial issues.

Companies could be in trouble with wage theft and other labor abuses, Youker said.

“We’ve received over 200 requests for labor abuses,” Youker said, adding that 86 of those were related to wage theft.

“Workers who do come forward are often able to recover damages,” she said. “And it’s always confidential.”