



NEWS RELEASE

Call 911 for Wage Theft

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In April, the Seattle City Council voted unanimously to make wage theft, the intentional failure to pay an employee for work, a criminal offense. The legislation was signed by the Mayor in early May and became effective on June 7th 2011. In passing this wage theft ordinance, Seattle is taking a national leadership role by joining a handful of other cities that have passed similar legislation including New Orleans, Denver, Kansas City, and Austin.

Joel Coronado is all too familiar with the problem of wage theft. Coronado claims that he is owed more than \$8,000 for work he performed for SMI Building Services LLC, a local janitorial company that contracts with many business in the Seattle area. According to Coronado, his employer, Frank Christin, misclassified him as an independent contractor and also withheld two months of his pay as a deposit. When Joel left the job after a year and a half, his employer refused to return the deposit. With the passage of the new wage theft ordinance, actions like those of Coronado's employer could be prosecuted as wage theft. Seattle City Council Member Tim Burgess, original sponsor of the ordinance, said "The full force of the City's police and prosecution resources will be used against unscrupulous employers who intentionally withhold wages."

The ordinance makes it a gross misdemeanor to intentionally commit wage theft and adds new definitions of conduct that is considered illegal. The ordinance clarifies city law to apply either at the "place where the agreement for service was made or at the location where the services are performed," so that workers hired in Seattle for work outside of the city would be protected as well. The ordinance also grants the city the authority to revoke business licenses.

The passage of the ordinance was the culmination of over a year of work by Casa Latina and the Washington State Coalition to Stop Wage Theft. Mayor Mike McGinn said, "The success of this legislation belongs to

our city's community groups, faith institutions, labor communities and my fellow elected officials working together to protect workers' rights."

Chief of Police John Diaz said, "We all know (wage theft) to be wrong, on many different levels, but up until now it wasn't a crime. To those that hire workers and then refuse to pay them for honest labor, consider yourselves on notice. To those workers who have had their wages stolen from them, we urge you to call the Seattle Police Department to make a report."

Workers can call 911 and make a report directly to the police or they can call the new bilingual wage theft hotline operated by Casa Latina at 206-816-5824 (Spanish and English). Wage theft disproportionately affects low-wage workers, many of whom are immigrants and people of color. City Attorney Pete Holmes said, "This is a race and social justice issue." In passing this ordinance, the City of Seattle is standing behind workers and sending the strong message that people should be paid for their work.

About Casa Latina

CASA Latina is a grassroots nonprofit organization established in 1994 that gives voice to low-wage Latino immigrant workers and families in Seattle. For more information, visit www.casa-latina.org