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### Maryland News

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# Group: Human trafficking on rise in Montgomery County

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Montgomery County has been bombarded with heart-rending cases of illegal immigrants working under slave-labor conditions and often being sexually abused, according to a nonprofit advocacy group that is monitoring the situation.

"We've got dozens of cases" of domestic illegal immigrant workers being forced to work an average of 80 hours a week, some of whom are paid less than \$1 hourly, said Elizabeth Keyes, an attorney with Casa de Maryland, which seeks to protect the rights of immigrant workers.

Keyes will be testifying today at the county's Joint Health & Human Services Committee and Public Safety hearing. Several victims also are expected to testify. Their testimony is expected to be bolstered by Dee Walker, the county's chief of investigative services, who will explain the rise in human trafficking and prostitution in Montgomery and how they can be combated.

Sexual abuse of indentured immigrants often comes with the territory of being forced to work, said Jeredine Williams, an organizer with the Migrant and Refugee Cultural Support Inc. Williams said human trafficking and sexual abuse in Montgomery have been increasing recently.

#### **Council in fact-finding phase**

County Council Member George Leventhal said he anticipates the council will draft and enact legislation that protects immigrant and undocumented workers, but that the council is currently in the formative fact-finding phase on the issue.

"We will move legislation" regarding indenturing and abusing immigrant and illegal workers, he said.

"Every time we have education and outreach programs [for indentured immigrants], we get more and more cases," Keyes said.

Keyes took the case of Germania Velasco, a 36-year-old domestic worker who was employed, underpaid and overworked by Veronica Pena, she said. Pena cannot be prosecuted as a criminal because she is employed by the Ecuadoran embassy and eligible for diplomatic immunity, but Velasco can still sue in civil court to recoup lost wages.

Leventhal said he would like to see cases where workers are hindered by their employers' diplomatic

immunity pursued to the fullest extent of the law, although that sometimes means that criminal charges cannot be filed. Financial restitution is feasible in these cases, Keyes said.

"Just because you have diplomatic immunity doesn't mean you can continue to break the law," Leventhal said.

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