

Trying To Help Immigrants Forum sees ESL classes, jobs as answers

By Bonnie Hobbs/Centre View
Thursday, December 04, 2008



At the end of their last meeting, members of the Centreville Immigration Forum compiled a list of ways they could help immigrants in the local community. At their Nov. 18 meeting, they added to it and discussed their next moves.

"When we have food-pantry day, I could survey people to find out if they need jobs," said Hilda Rexach of Western Fairfax Christian Ministries (WFCM). She also suggested Barb Shaiko of Centreville United Methodist Church (CUMC) do likewise during her church's Grace Ministries program, which furnishes food and clothing to those in need.

Alice Foltz of Wellspring United Church of Christ said her church wants to hire a Spanish-speaking person to stand on the corner outside Centreville Regional Library, where day laborers gather for jobs, and distribute information about English classes available to them.

"A volunteer asked them if they wanted to learn English, and they all said yes," said Foltz. "But it's difficult to take classes if you're outside waiting for a job." Noting that, one morning, of 40 hopefuls, only a few were hired, she said, "We also need to find out if there are families in crisis so we could refer them [to organizations which could provide help]."

For instance, Shaiko said various groups could help families whose gas or electricity is turned off for nonpayment, "but it's hard when they don't speak the language [or] are afraid to go to the government for help."

WELLSPRING'S Mike Morse suggested the group put together a packet or booklet with information needed by immigrants, all in one place, and hand it out. "It would list all types of resources and give information about hooking up with advocacy people and getting other kinds of help," he said.

"A dream of mine is to have a hotline people could call if, for example, they get evicted or their power is turned off," added Foltz. "To me, that would be helpful, but I don't know how the



Photo by Bonnie Hobbs/Centre View

Jane Kirsch (on left) and Pat Hood (on right) listen while LeeAnna Bryant speaks.



Photo by Bonnie Hobbs/Centre View

Esteban Garces



[Email this Article](#)
[Print this Article](#)

phone line would be managed."

"You could get one number and assign one organization per week to man the line," said Rexach. "And I can get you Spanish-speaking volunteers." CUMC's Joe Gillen said the hotline could be advertised in the information package.

Foltz asked the church representatives if they believe their churches are meeting the immigrant needs they're trying to fulfill. "We're sponsoring a Spanish congregation at our church that will start soon," said the Rev. Bill Hatcher of Centreville Baptist.

Jane Kirsch of Centreville Presbyterian Church said its ESL program has been running for 1 1/2 years. "We're certainly meeting the need of teaching them the language," said CUMC's Ann Gillen. "They want to learn it so they can get jobs."

Morse suggested asking local businesspeople what jobs are available, and Foltz said Cheryl Repetti of the Centreville Community Foundation favored establishing an Internet job bank. Foltz also recommended perhaps training the day laborers for jobs other than construction.

Rexach said technicians and nurses' aides are always needed, but the training takes time and money. And, she warned, immigrants must have a green card or work permit to be employed.

"IMMIGRANTS COULD be part of the rebuilding of the economy," said Esteban Garces of Tenants and Workers United. "With the new administration, there'll be a big push to go green. A lot of government buildings all across the nation aren't green, and they could [help change that]."

"I personally would like to see a workers' center so employers would register and there'd be a way to get back to them if they didn't pay workers what they owed them," said Foltz. "That's the only way we could give the workers some protection. But the problem of our declining economy makes that difficult to do."

And when she asked whether the community would support a workers' center, Pat Hood of Centreville Presbyterian Church replied, "It would really be a hard sell."

Foltz suggested recruiting jobs such as house cleaning, yard work or painting, from church members. They could then be listed with the Lincoln Lewis Multicultural Center, which could do job matches.

Joe Gillen asked about the needs of the families left behind after ICE raids. "Some of them must be in a terrible situation," said

Wellspring's George Crossman.

Garces said they need rental and utility assistance, plus food and clothing. "They need bond assistance, too, to help get family members out of jail," he added.

"Bond ranges from \$1,500 to \$20,000, depending on their stake in the community. So I've been seeing if I can get them three months of food, rent and utility assistance from area churches. It's like the rug was pulled out from under them, and it's abrupt. One day, their life is fine; the next day, everything is torn up."

"So if you had a list of churches saying we could sponsor a family, in the event of a raid, that would help?" asked Foltz.

"Right," answered Garces. He also stressed the need for immigration reform, and Wellspring's Sara Little recommended "mobilizing" church members to write letters advocating that to their political representatives. She also suggested "having some process whereby illegal immigrants could become legal and get work permits."

Shaiko said Fairfax County's requests for rental assistance have increased more than 40 percent in the past two years. "There are a lot of people around here — low-income, disabled, on Social Security, etc. — who are never going to be able to survive without assistance on a regular basis," she explained. "But if they can be trained for a job, they should be."



©2011 [Connection Newspapers](#). All Rights Reserved. [Privacy Policy](#)
1606 King Street ♦ Alexandria, VA 22314 ♦ 703-821-5050
Site Design, Development and Hosting by [Timberlake Publishing](#)

[Subscribe to our email editions here.](#)