

Forum: How To Help Immigrants  
Participants hope for more community involvement.



By Bonnie Hobbs  
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Efforts to help the local immigrant community, and discussions about what's still needed, were the topics of the latest meeting of the Centreville Immigration Forum. It was held last Tuesday, Feb. 3, at Centreville Baptist Church.

Barb Shaiko, director of missions at Centreville United Methodist Church (CUMC), spoke about the Grace Ministries program her church offers, the second Saturday of each month. It provides Hispanic immigrants with emergency food, clothing and diapers, plus healthcare and spiritual guidance, and Shaiko said the response has been overwhelming.

"In January, 195 families — about 700 people — came," she said. "Most are coming from Centreville, Chantilly, Herndon, Reston, Manassas and Manassas Park, plus some from Fairfax and Alexandria. In our area, 95 percent [of those we help] are Latino immigrants."

Shaiko said CUMC is buying food from the Capital Area Food Bank, and CUMC's Joe Gillen said Panera, Starbucks and Manhattan Bagel have also contributed food items to Grace Ministries.

Alice Foltz of Wellspring United Church of Christ, which sponsored the forum, said that, when she visited the ministry recently, she saw there was "a need for clothing." Said Gillen: "We especially need medium to small clothing for the men."

Agreeing, Shaiko said that, because of the huge demand, "We're running out of clothes, and I'm thinking of having schoolchildren collect for us. Word-of-mouth will also help."

So will clothing donations to CUMC for the ministry from local residents. Said Foltz: "It's really important for the whole community to adopt this program, if it's going to work."

She said Wellspring continues doing what it can to help Centreville's day laborers. "We're paying Connie Rojas to go to the corner of Machen Road and St. Germain Drive, Wednesday mornings," said Foltz. "She gets to know the day laborers and, in emergencies, she can pass on information, and they really seem to appreciate it."

"You just see how desperate these people are, particularly with the economy now," added Wellspring moderator Sara Little. "They don't have jobs."

"In December, we took them warm coats and invited them to help themselves," said Foltz's husband Jerry. "[So donations of] coats, hats, scarves and gloves are really helpful."

Alice Foltz said church members have also come into contact with some day laborers who are homeless and living outdoors, even in below-freezing weather." She noted that FACETS operates a hypothermia shelter in two locations that rotate from church to church. "People get hot meals and a bag lunch before they leave at 7 a.m.," she said.

Sarah Allen, a regional director with Fairfax County's Department of Systems Management for Human Services, said mental-health outreach workers for the county "can also make site visits to people living outside. No one needs to sleep outside, at all, ever."

Foltz said the day laborers requested English-language classes on Sundays so, as of last Sunday, Feb. 8, Rojas began offering them free, each Sunday, from 1-3 p.m., at the Centreville Regional Library. Foltz hopes other churches will follow suit, and Allen said she could also have a Spanish-speaking social worker come and talk to the day laborers on Sundays, as well.

IN ADDITION, Jane Kirsch with Centreville Presbyterian Church said her church's ESOL program offers beginning, intermediate and advanced English classes. "We'd love more students," she said. "And a Sunday class is appealing to me."

Next, Dan Choi and Arnoldo Borja, with the Legal Aid Justice Center in Falls Church, talked about the problems they're seeing. "Day laborers, restaurant employees, taxi drivers — the numbers of people who aren't getting paid are rising," said Choi. "Subcontractors aren't getting paid, so they don't pay their workers."

Borja, who tries to organize Annandale's 500 day laborers, said he helps them see that "It's a high price to leave their families behind. We came to this country with the illusion of a better place to live. We've come from countries including Mexico, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala and Peru. Now, we're all in the same place and it's helping us understand each other. But we also have to learn to trust each other." Choi said Borja takes little booklets to the day laborers so they can learn English, plus the rights they have in the U.S., while waiting around for jobs.

Pleased, Foltz said, "I think it's wonderful that you're getting them to talk together, develop groups and take leadership roles. That way, they feel better about themselves. The day laborers [here in Centreville] asked us why people didn't like them, and we didn't have an easy answer."

Jenn Vaz, with the Literacy Council of Northern Virginia, said her organization offers both tutoring and classroom programs. Tutoring is for those who can only speak basic English, but can't read or write it. The classroom program is for adults and families and is geared toward creating a community.

"Adults and their children come twice a week," said Vaz. "Classes meet at various places in Herndon, anyplace that'll partner with us. We teach basic literacy and things such as how to fill out apartment leases, apply for jobs and find different resources."

Classes are \$35, but people attending every class get to go for free, the next semester — and get a Target gift card. "We give incentives," said Vaz. "I've been pushing for us to come to Centreville. If anyone knows of a site where we can meet, contact me at [jenn.vaz@gmail.com](mailto:jenn.vaz@gmail.com)."

Foltz said she still hopes to put together a package of resource information and emergency phone numbers people may call when they need help. "We still have families in crisis," she said. "We should also make a list of individuals who'd be the contact people — temporarily — for families in need."

Furthermore, she wants to draw more churches into the Centreville Immigration Forum meetings. "We have a lot of churches in our community — and other groups, as well — who aren't represented," said Foltz. Shaiko then volunteered to write a letter to the various pastors "to introduce ourselves and let them know what's going on."

Sandy Chisholm, with Fairfax County government, said County Executive Anthony Griffin will release the new county budget on Feb. 23. Then, on March 11, from 2-4 p.m., in rooms 2 and 3 of the Government Center, Deputy County Executive Verdiana Haywood will explain how the budget cuts will affect programs coming under the umbrella of Human Services.

"We know there'll be budget cuts and they could impact what we do," said Foltz. "But on the other hand, it makes it more important to work together to try to find creative resources to be helpful."



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