

November VAN Meeting Notes

Topic: Immigrant Elders

Tuesday, November 12, 2002, 10 a.m. to noon

Present

Carrie Bassett, Thor Carlson, William Cox, Cathy Coult, Jane Cunningham, Carol Daly, Alice Evans, Jerry Fagerland, Bruce Farrington, Meridel Fahal, Martha Feda, Randy George, Karen Greer, Susan Thurston Hamerski, Jan Hively (Convenor and Recorder), Kate Houston, Janet Jacobson, Nancy J. Johnson, Nan Just, Jenny Keyser, Vinnie Kutty, Jim Lenarz, Dawn Lindblom, Kalia Lo, Melinda Ludwiczak, Emily Madland, Mary Maher, Georgiana May, Lindsey McDivitt, Ann Meissner, Gunilla Montgomery, Kris Orluck, Yoonju Park, Ann Pflaum, Robert Pope, Grace Ramseyer, Kathryn Ringham, Barbara Satin, Lisa Sawyer, Sue Sheridan, Janet Triplett, Mary O'Brien Tyrell, Bee Vue, Dolores Zeller

Experience Corps

Dawn Lindblom, from the Volunteers of America, introduced two special guests: Randy George and Janet Triplett.

Randy George is employed by Civic Ventures, based in San Francisco, to oversee 15 Experience Corps programs in 14 cities around the country. The role of Civic Ventures is to develop new opportunities that will involve a new generation of older adults in community service and civic engagement. In Minneapolis, the Experience Corps involves older adults in tutoring and mentoring children in 8 Minneapolis schools. Each participant volunteers 12 - 15 hours per week, amounting to 450 a year, and receives a stipend that covers expenses and a \$250 education voucher. The Minneapolis program, managed now through the Volunteers of America, was begun in 1995.

Janet Triplett is the new Minneapolis organizer for Experience Corps. She is recruiting volunteers. The effort makes a big difference in average reading scores. There has been a 458% increase in the reading scores of the 4th and 5th grade students who have participated in the program.

Immigrant Elders

Carol Daly introduced Vinnie (Vinodh) Kutty, the Director of Multi-Cultural Services for Hennepin County. Carol met Vinnie at a Cross-Cultural Community Dialogue, where Vinnie expressed concern about the lack of attention to immigrant elders on the Vital Aging Summit agenda. Vinnie himself is an immigrant. He moved to the U.S. from Singapore in 1986. He added a B.A. from Macalester to his B.A. from Singapore and is now working on his Ph.D. in Anthropology at the U of MN. He had directed the Center for Cross-Cultural Health until he came to Hennepin County to open the new Office of Multi-Cultural Services in 2000.

The four largest groups of MN immigrants, based on a 1999 survey, are Chicano-Latino, East Africans, Southeast Asian, and Eastern European. Outreach liaisons do the bulk of the work of accessing appropriate services for each group. They speak Somali, Oromo, and Spanish, primarily, but they can find an interpreter for other languages. Some of the

requests involve a lot of time and paperwork. Recently, for example, the divorce rate has increased significantly. They require a lot of paper work.

There are 300 statutes that apply to immigration, most of them confusing and intimidating. The office has two immigration specialists and an immigration advocate. The office also has five VISTA workers, 10 interpreters who focus on economic assistance, one LEP (Language Education) manager who provides outreach to assure LEP assistance to all of the County departments, and one Workforce Development Specialist who educates staff in how to work with immigrants. Recently, the office has received a new grant for working with Spanish and Somali students in Roosevelt High School. The Multi-Cultural Services Office has two advisory groups -- a community advisory committee, and a staff advisory group. Also, there is assistance available through the four state advisory councils, for Asian and Pacific Islanders, Black Minnesotans, Spanish Speaking residents, and Indian Affairs.

Immigrant elders are often especially vulnerable, even as they share the needs of their whole families -- housing, income support, health care and education/literacy. Becoming "old" in their home countries occurs earlier in life than it does here. They are likely to be dependent upon their children, who themselves are struggling making their way in a new land. Because of their relative isolation from day-to-day multicultural interaction in the community's schools or workplaces, it is harder for them than it is for younger generations to achieve bicultural competence. It's also difficult for their families to honor their elders without expanding their dependency. Although it is appropriate to be optimistic about the capacity of elders to learn, it takes longer.

For immigrant families, "the dying of an older person is akin to the burning down of a library." The elders provide cultural continuity for their grandchildren, particularly in carrying on traditional ceremonies.

We need to know about organizational partnerships and what additional opportunities there may be for our immigrant elders. How should the service agencies be better connected? Every individual needs personal connections, but it is very time consuming to work with each individual when there is a language barrier. It takes more than twice the time to work through an interpreter. There are directories for services and providers that respond to the question, "Does the staff have the capacity to provide multi-cultural outreach?" The availability of interpreters is the key.

Vinnie's office has developed the Hennepin County Curriculum for interpreters -- used by bilingual staff, trained interpreters, and volunteers alike. Interpreters go through the training as part of the LEP plan. There is no national certification in place, however. The office doesn't have interpreters for all languages. Sometimes, people are not able to tell us what language they speak.

Minnesota is accepting 3,000 to 4,000 refugees each year. The U.S. was accepting 90,000 refugees each year until two years ago. Then, the number was reduced to 70,000, then, after September 11, to 12,000 this last year, and for 2003, 50,000 are expected. In

addition, of course, we are receiving thousands of immigrants who had come to other locations and have been drawn by relatives or hearsay to Minnesota. There is no way of estimating the numbers of secondary migrants. They have fanned out to communities across Minnesota, usually with three generations in each home. In Hennepin County, the largest group of immigrants who are not refugees are Chicano-Latino. Refugees who were pushed out by their countries are given federal assistance for eight months in the U.S. Then, they become immigrants, pulled by their choice of areas where they can make a living.

Vinnie Kutty read the attached report in which he describes the challenges facing immigrant elders. Please distribute or use this report and/or excerpts from it. Please give proper credit -- as a citation in your text (Kutty, 2002), and as a reference at the end of your text: Kutty, V. (2002). Full title.

Discussion

- Do you have a pool of volunteers? Is there a need to reach out to isolated elders?
- Yes, there's a need, but the language barrier is too great for English-speaking volunteers. The best way to involve volunteers is to set up events, and have interpreters go along.

- Don't the children and grandchildren read to them and encourage conversations in English?
- The families are very busy working on their employment, schooling, and citizenship. We have set up classes for the elders to come with their families, but they didn't come.
- Lack of communication among the generations is typical in our mainstream culture, even though it seems that intergenerational activities are the key to help both children and elders to assimilate.
- If you can't speak the language, you lose your identity in the community, and with it, your dignity.

- Some services have adapted to address the language issue. For example, the defensive driving course is offered in Russian. Senior meals have been changed to be culturally appropriate.
- Mutual assistance agencies are struggling financially to pay for interpretive services. It costs \$50 an hour, with a two hour minimum, for an interpreter.
- The Metro Area Agency on Aging is funding nine service agencies within the variety of ethnic communities. They help with transportation, etc.

- Have you seen an increase in the divorce rate for the elders, also? Why is there an increase?
- Because they can! There is more freedom for women in America.

- Public agencies interpret the data privacy law to say that only the service recipient, him or herself, can apply for a service. That means that no interpreter can use the Web or the phone to request or advocate or ask questions of the financial worker or

health care worker, etc. to respond to an immigrant's stated need. Instead, you have to drive the immigrant to the physical location where service can be found. They you both stand in line, etc. This is what really takes time!

- Some counties are trying to do something about this. For example, a State Health Insurance Counselor can act as an agent if the relationship is on file. He/she is assigned a password to the Web site. The INS recognizes agents who show a power of attorney form. It is a public policy issue.
- We saw the power of ageism in this last election. Immigrant elders face multiple barriers -- language, culture, ageism. When elders are respected, they will make real contributions.
- The Boomers are coming. They will not tolerate the oppression of ageism
- We have seen great changes in the treatment of people with disabilities who have been integrated within the community. The same will/must happen for older adults.
- VAN must work against the tendency to look internally, at our own condition, and must instead look outward, to and across other cultures.
- We can use the Arts for multi-cultural activities that don't require oral language.
- What about a multi-cultural exhibit of the work of elders? In a space where we can also be led in creating dance or pantomime or visual art together?

You can find more information about the Hennepin Office of Multi-Cultural Services on the Web at: <<http://www.co.hennepin.mn.us/chpcsi/chpcsi.html>>

Tuesday, December 10, 10 to noon, Meeting Room, Roseville Library
Topic: Co-Creating VAN

We want to make sure that VAN participants are all on the same page, aligning our hopes and dreams with our action plans as we move into 2003. How can we support ourselves and each other? How do we communicate the successes of others? Now, the people who attend VAN meetings tend to be either spectators or exhibitors. We need to encourage more doers who will be actively engaged from month to month.

The purpose of the December meeting will be to: 1) provide creative input to the current VAN plan, 2) contribute specific ideas for 2003, 3) get involved in response to requests ("ads") from the committee chairs. VAN members who cannot attend the December meeting will have the opportunity to respond to specific questions included with the minutes. The Strategic Planning Committee and Leadership Group can look at what comes out of the meeting to lay out a specific plan for 2003.