

December 10, 2009

Growing non-native population needs systemic approach to ESL

by Kay Wright

Lexington, KY - The Central Christian Church (CCC) ESL Needs Assessment Project was designed to establish a concrete understanding of the number and language needs of non-native community members who must acquire English proficiency to work and thrive locally.

Wanda Bertram, executive director of LexLinc and chair of Outreach Ministries at CCC, and Isabel Taylor, multicultural affairs coordinator for LFUCG, initiated the project. Dr. Aminata Cairo, formerly of UK, led the research, which was conducted between March and July of 2009.

Results show that Fayette County has 3,821 individuals who do not speak English as their "home" language. The majority, or 2,629 to be precise, speak Spanish; 214 speak Japanese; 142 speak Arabic; 138 speak Chinese Mandarin; 76 speak Swahili; 66 speak French; 49 speak Nepali; 47 speak Vietnamese; 45 speak Korean; 41 speak Russian; and 25 speak Kirundi.

Data was also collected about the number and nature of the programs providing English as Second Language (ESL) classes. Thirteen ESL programs were identified, operating at 19 sites. These sites include public libraries, Operation Read, churches, Carnegie Center and Bluegrass Community and Technical College.

At a recent forum held at CCC, ESL providers noted a number of concerns. These included the availability of programs, training of teachers, child care, infrequent attendance by women due to household tasks, work, transportation, lack of information, wide range of education of clients, lack of resources including computers, need for a coordinated "clearinghouse" of services and communication across providers.

Participants also noted the unattended mental health issues affecting individuals and their families. This may be particularly true of refugees who have experienced the horrors of wars, malnourishment, inadequate health care, loss of family members and the trauma of resettlement.

Enculturation of immigrants and refugees will continue and grow. The Pew Research Center (2008) predicts that the population of the United States will increase to 438 million in 2050 from 296 million in 2005, and 82 percent of the increase will come from immigrants. Of those, 67 million will be the immigrants themselves and 50 million will be their U.S.-born descendants. By 2025, the foreign-born will surpass the peak during the last great wave of immigration a century ago.

Across the country, ESL efforts are fragmented at best. Non-native speakers are often stereotyped as "deficit" learners. English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) may be preferred over ESL, as it does not assume that learners are necessarily taking on a second language, but may be acquiring a third, fourth or fifth language. The term also shifts an emphasis from the importance of English over other languages and cultures. English proficiency is a tool, just as Spanish would be a tool while working and living in Spain.

At the other end of the spectrum are individuals who are illiterate in their home or first language. Learning disabilities are frequently unidentified or addressed. Children often become the interpreters for adult

family members.

The ability to use English in a functional way is critical to employment and improved quality of life for refugees and immigrants. As noted by the CCC study, Lexington/Fayette County needs a more coordinated and systematic plan for delivery of language services for non-native speakers. This is a quality of life issue. It is also about the economic futures of these individuals and their families, as well as the workforce development of our region.

Teacher preparation is at issue in ESL services. Standards should include knowledge of adult learning strategies and the ability to apply strategies to individual learners with consideration of culture, experience and ability. Using tools for continuous assessment of language learners would be an ongoing part of the program. Teachers would also be able to employ language learning strategies in contextual settings. (Translating learned knowledge into practice while engaging in job or social activities was one recommendation of the CCC study.) Finally, teachers must be proficient in English.

In 2007, the Center for Applied Linguistics published a brief entitled "Workplace Instruction and Workforce Preparation for Adult Immigrants." The authors identify three venues in which federally funded instruction is available for immigrant workers: the workplace, in vocational classes and in adult ESL classes. Workplace classes offer ease of scheduling, authenticity of content and a positive work environment enhanced by fellow immigrant workers as peer mentors or conversation partners. A sense of community may be achieved, offering an "anchor" in the resettled life of the immigrant.

Companies with global operations may find the non-English speaker an asset in doing business. Learning to use English in the workplace is an ongoing process guided by classroom instruction and workplace experience. It requires instructors who are prepared to teach English to adult learners and are familiar with the workplace setting.

There is clearly a need for continued dialogue and an implementable plan to improve and expand services to those learning English. The most important contributors to this dialogue will be the refugees and immigrants.