# Cover Story

# Immigrants and Volunteering

## *Many Are Eager to Give Back by Helping Others*

**By Patty Rhule**

America's newest residents are eagerly making use of volunteer groups to help them learn English, find a job, understand the culture of their new home, and become citizens.

And once they have settled in their new homeland, they represent a valuable pool of potential volunteers to help other newcomers, knowing what it's like to be a stranger in a strange land and having themselves struggled with English, finding a home, getting a job. But while all volunteers juggle their service time with the demands of work and family life, new immigrants must also overcome cultural and language barriers to community activism.

"In our community, it's a struggle," says Pedro Avilés, executive director of the Latino Civil Rights Task Force in Washington, D.C. "A lot of the Latino community is extremely busy, working two to three jobs to make ends meet." The task force, which has about 50 volunteers, many of them students and young adults, monitors policies and proposals that could affect the Latino community. The group's current focus is on elementary schools, urging parents to get involved and learn how to make teachers and principals, and ultimately, students and themselves, accountable for improving education. Latino parents have shied from involvement in PTAs, for example, largely because of language and cultural gaps, Avilés says.

Avilés also says the United States has a tradition of volunteerism and civic activism that other countries do not. In his native El Salvador, most volunteerism centers on schools and churches; there is not the level of nonprofit activity as in the United States.

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Bonnie Wells, director of volunteer management for the International Center in New York, concurs. The center was founded in 1961 to help foreigners learn English, American culture, and "learn to survive and adapt in New York City," Wells says. Most of her clients are students from Taiwan, Korea and Japan who are here to get an education and then return to their homelands. "Because they've been helped through education, they want to give back" and volunteer at the center. "In many of their countries, volunteerism doesn't exist. They are overwhelmed that people here have jobs and then they come here [to volunteer]. And they're not getting paid for it."

For immigrants hoping to stay in this country, volunteerism can be a make-or-break factor in becoming naturalized citizens. "It's very important for immigration that people are involved in volunteerism," says Silvia Gonzalez, immigrant and refugee services director of the International Institute in Los Angeles. "They can lose their cases because they were not involved. The judge will say, 'They have been here this long but they are not involved in the community.'"

The institute helps resettle refugees and offers legal services at low cost to immigrants. Staffers in Gonzalez' office speak 12 languages to serve their clientele, which include Russians, Latinos, Vietnamese, and other Asians. Gonzalez always urges newcomers to get involved in their community. "There's always a need for volunteers. Many groups could benefit from volunteers who could do translating." So far, in her office, only Russians have returned to volunteer—and they are among the newest arrivals.

Gonzalez, who was born in Mexico, also says volunteerism is "unique to America. You don't find this wide variety of volunteers in other countries." In

Mexico, it is mostly the elite women who volunteer for agencies like the Red Cross, she says.

## Helping Hands

Often, newcomers who have gone through volunteer groups for help settling here return to help other countrymen. "There are a lot of interconnections," says Kathryn Hay, community outreach coordinator of the refugee community program of Lutheran Social Services in Washington, D.C. Her group works to resettle Bosnian, Vietnamese, Cuban, Sudanese, Somali, and Iraqi Kurd refugees, picking them up at the airport, and—through the sponsorship of community churches—setting them up in apartments, helping them to find jobs, medical care, and English tutoring.

*Tuan Le, left, meets with Mayor Ferguson of Riverdale, Md., and two other Vietnamese refugees who belong to a mutual assistance association.*

Hay sees a lot of Cubans helping other Cubans. The Muslim community invites newcomers to dinners hosted to celebrate Ramadan. Among the Vietnamese community, "some were wonderful, others discriminated against (Amerasian immigrants) as had happened back home."

Professional basketball player Manute Bol has offered space in his restaurant for fellow Sudanese immigrants wanting to get together. "They have great communities here, the Somalis also," says Hay. "They are from community cultures, as opposed to [Americans], who are very independent. They help each other to whatever extent they can."

In Snohomish County, Washington, about 30 miles north of Seattle, immigrants have formed their own mutual assistance associations to help other immigrants avoid the pitfalls inherent in making a new country home. And these groups have helped to smooth frayed feelings among the native Washington population, says Van Kuno, director of the Refugee and Immigrant Forum.

Her organization helps immigrants and refugees to the area get settled, find homes and jobs, and learn English. Kuno says it's also her group's role to show the native residents that the immigrants who have swelled from one percent of the population 10 years ago to about 10 percent are not taking from the community but have much to give. "With the minority population growing so fast, the people in this area don't know how to deal with it," says Kuno. "The people are afraid the immigrants and refugees will steal jobs and that tax dollars will go to educate immigrants and refugees."

To combat those attitudes, the Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian and Russian immigrant communities each formed mutual assistance associations. They go to school district meetings, assist children with limited English skills in school, help newcomers register their children, and provide health-care screening.

Through these associations, the Russian community reduced the high school dropout rate of its young people from 60 percent to 20 percent, Kuno says, providing bilingual tutors, helping with homework, and bridging communication gaps between parents and educators. And in the 1980s, when some Vietnamese youth formed a gang, the Vietnamese association combined forces with local police to combat the trend.

Similar cooperation among communities has drawn more Hmong immigrant families in Minnesota to Twin Cities Habitat for Humanity. Executive director Stephen Seidel says that after Habitat built or rehabilitated housing for the first few Hmong families several years back, "we then received a number of applications from others who looked to the first families as leaders and guides." Word-of-mouth in the Laotian Hmong community is strong, Seidel says, and some of the first families helped by Habitat serve as interpreters and mentors for others.

## Spreading the Word

Seidel's advice for attracting immigrant involvement is to look to the young people. "The cultural and language adjustment is easier for children. I'm talking 10- to 16-year-olds who serve as real mentors for their parents."

In addition to relying on word of mouth, nonprofit groups targeting immigrants advertise in newspapers and on radio stations that serve non-English speaking residents, contact churches, synagogues, hospitals, community groups and the Immigration and Naturalization Service to let people know help is available.

In Northern Virginia, immigrants in the Literacy Council's program to improve English speaking skills often return to their communities to form conversation groups and help less literate neighbors with perplexing paperwork. "When you have a volunteer who has just had the experience [of being new to a country], it helps a lot, being compassionate and understanding of the learning process. I wish we had more volunteers with

backgrounds like our students," says Maggie Pearson, special projects coordinator.

While some of her students can read and write in English, speaking is another matter for most, says Pearson. The Literacy Council offers one-on-one tutoring for adults as well as computer software programs to improve English literacy. What prompts students to seek out the council's programs? Survival, says Pearson. And the need is great. The council estimates there are thousands of adults in Northern Virginia who could use its services; waiting lists to get into the program range from a few weeks to months. "We always have more students than teachers."

In Snohomish County, "The need is a lot greater than whatever we can provide," says Kuno. Basic needs of food and shelter for some immigrants would not be met were it not for the forum's efforts. She sends staffers to local food banks because "the people at the food bank have no idea what these people eat. We tell them not to give so much meat and cheese to Asians— 55 percent of Pacific Rim Asians can't digest dairy products. Get them rice. Middle Easterners don't eat pork, and they don't eat chicken the way we kill them."

The forum also sends translators with immigrants who need energy assistance programs. Often, "people don't know how to work with people who speak with accents or who look different," she says.

Jobs and language skills are the greatest needs of the immigrant community and are the focus of most nonprofit efforts aimed at foreign-born residents. And both factors make immigrants more likely to volunteer.

# Welcoming Newcomers as Volunteers

**By Stephanie Kipperman**

More than a hundred of the volunteers in our program at Jewish Family and Children's Services are emigres from the former Soviet Union. Newcomers—here a few months or a few years—help us in and out of the office, translating, teaching, cooking, assisting with set-up and clean-up, organizing, repairing donated small electronics and sitting on our committees.

In the midst of dealing with the often overwhelming stress of emigration and resettlement, involving multiple losses, enormous hardship and numerous changes, many emigres have found the energy to perform a wide variety of volunteer tasks.

Sometimes the local community—and even American-born staff in agencies and organizations that are begging for help—has a stereotypical view of who the newcomers are and what they can and cannot do that gets in the way of seeing the value of this new resource. Indeed, there is a huge pool of energy which we are only beginning to tap.

■ The key is, first, to see the newcomers as the valuable resource and addition to our community that they are—to see them as providers as well as recipients of service.

■ Second, look to the newcomers (just as we do American-born volunteers) as individuals, rather than one undifferentiated group. For indeed, there is tremendous diversity in the population as well as certain cultural features in common.

■ Third, we need to go where the newcomers are—to the English classes, the community centers, the neighborhoods, the Russian-, Spanish- or Korean-language press—rather than expecting that people who have no prior experience with volunteerism will somehow magically realize that this is a possibility and know how to access it.

■ Fourth, we need to expand opportunities for involvement both for those who speak English well and those whose English is more limited, and for needs within programs specifically designed for the emigre population as well as in the larger community.

■ Fifth, we need to look at our own conscious and unconscious cultural biases. Then, hopefully, we will be able to recognize the ways "that we always do it" that may not work as well with people coming from a different background.

■ And, last but not least, we need to see the benefits to the community as a whole in broadening our volunteer base to include more newcomers—benefits that include building bridges to decrease isolation and marginalization and increasing communication, mutual understanding, and the dissemination of accurate information

It isn't always easy, of course. There is often a difference in expectations and unspoken assumptions, as well as language proficiency. Misunderstandings happen, and it takes patience, sensitivity and a willingness to work at overcoming barriers to reap success. One of the most active volunteers in the community, for example, was a leading activist in the former Soviet Union, battling for the right of Jews to emigrate as well as to observe Jewish traditions. Once in San Francisco, it took him some time to learn how to work within the American system, but now he is a leader here as well. ■

*Stephanie Probst Kipperman is a volunteer coordinator at Jewish Family and Children's Services in San Francisco.*

"When they've been here long enough that they speak enough English, they feel comfortable about helping others," says Kuno.

Work culture can be a jarring change for some newcomers. Louise Valdes-Fauli, co-chair of the Guantanamo Bay Refugee Assistance Program in Miami, says Cubans new to this country "think America is the land of milk and honey. In [Castro's] Cuba, it's 'I'll pretend to work and you pretend to pay me.' The work ethics are very different."

Beyond those basics, refugees have the added burden of not being able to return home if things don't work out here. "That's a big difference from immigrants who come here to be with their families," says Hay. "That affects people emotionally. We don't work a whole lot with the psychological part of it. How many psychologists do you know who speak Serbo-Croatian?"

*ESL student Alice Weiand, left, and daughters Brenda and Bonnie work with their Literacy Council of Northern Virginia volunteer tutor Gail Baumford.*

## Making Connections

Wells, at the International Center in New York, says, "Even native New Yorkers can feel disconnected. For some [the center] is their home, this is where their friends are, where they socialize the most. They're dealing with the same issues we are. Everybody wants a sense of belonging, a sense of connection."

Making that connection can make all the difference. Kuno and her family fled Vietnam during the war when she was 19. Her parents and 11 brothers and sisters settled in a small community in Minnesota, where they were sponsored by two Lutheran churches. Kuno had a math teacher who became her mentor. "She took money out of her own pocket and got me an English dictionary. She sees me and my sisters and my brother with math capability and got us into calculus classes. The impact she had on us? The minimum education we have is a four-year degree, and nine of us have six years or more of higher education. This one person had an impact on 11 of us."

For many immigrants, however, becoming self-sufficient enough to aid others in a new country takes time. Sheila McGeehan, coordinator of the Lancaster, Pennsylvania, office of Prime-ECR, a refugee resettlement program, says she has had immigrants volunteer, but "it's after years, not months."

Immigrants often must settle for low-skill jobs, regardless of their education or work background at home, McGeehan says. "I've had some Cubans who were physicians who are now working at Tyson Foods, cutting chickens. There have been some complaints, but for the most part, they are okay with it. The physician knows what he has to do; he's not yet fluent in English."

Janusz Krzyzanowski of the Polish American Immigration and Relief Committee in New York, himself an immigrant in 1951, says, "It takes about seven years for a family to settle. It's the second generation that benefits from migration."

Despite the needs of the new immigrants, a tightening economy and culture clashes, there is evidence that the 1.1 million who enter this country each year will have as much impact as their forebears did.

"I feel very strongly that a lot of them will be good volunteers," says GRASP's Valdes-Fauli. The program's goal is to help Cuban refugees who are leaving detainment camps adapt to American life and "keep them off social services as much as possible," says Valdes-Fauli. "Our point is making them self-sufficient, put food on the table."

To that end, GRASP holds orientation seminars for the refugees in camps on such wide-ranging topics as driving rules, American culture, work ethics, the police, how to write a resume, interview, and find a job. GRASP doesn't stop there—"We spend money as it needs to be spent," says Valdes-Fauli. It provides Thanksgiving and Christmas baskets for refugees in need and free legal counseling, monitors 75 pregnant women, has paid for funeral services, and even hosted baby showers.

Valdes-Fauli tells of one woman who got a crib through GRASP and came in one day to return it. Her baby had outgrown it, and she felt someone else could use the helping hand she had received.

Another man that GRASP placed in a job at a Tyson Foods chicken plant in Alabama was sent off with $20 for meals for his trip. "God bless you," he told us, and gave me a big hug. But an hour later, she discovered he had given his money to a man on a street corner with a sign that read "will work for food." Says Valdes-Fauli, "He thought this man was needier." ■