



America's Newspapers

'Invisible immigrants' want to be counted

Oregonian, The (Portland, OR) - Monday, January 22, 2007

Author: GOSIA WOZNIACKA, *The Oregonian*

SUMMARY: Help | Advocates hope a survey will generate social services catering to the Eastern European population

The calls come from across the metro area. A boy is being expelled after threatening schoolmates with a baseball bat. A girl quits high school because she's getting married. A mother doesn't know what to do with children who have turned aggressive and refuse to attend school.

They are Eastern European immigrants, and they "don't know where to go," says Vadim Riskin, the Russian community liaison for the Portland Public Schools. "And we don't have the resources to help them."

Riskin, who came to Portland from Belarus, receives dozens of such desperate phone calls each week. He is one of the few Russian-speaking workers in Oregon helping these immigrants and knows that, like all newcomers, Russian-speakers have trouble adjusting to American life and have a lot of needs. But unlike other immigrants, they find little help.

"There's no special attention," he said. "We have the same problems as other minority groups, but we don't even have the luxury of knowing that, because we don't have (research) numbers to prove it."

That's what the Slavic Coalition wants to change. Riskin and fellow advocates in the Oregon group that represents Eastern Europeans are launching for a second time an effort to assess the needs of the Russian-speaking community in Multnomah County. They hope the assessment --which involves extensive research about a community's demographics, assets and social-service shortcomings --will bring in more resources to help the community and raise its profile.

Such an assessment, typically performed by independent researchers and funded by the county or through a grant, faces hurdles, however. Three years ago, coalition members say, they encountered a lack of political interest when they approached city and county officials.

Advocates say that is partly because Eastern Europeans aren't a high-profile group, often remaining isolated in their Christian churches. Because they are white, they aren't seen as a minority or eligible for minority grants to fund services. (Several thousand Jews from the former Soviet Union, also victims of religious persecution, live in the metro area. They receive assistance in large part through the Jewish community but face many of the same political and cultural issues.) Despite being one of the largest ethnic groups in the state, little or no data are collected about the community as a whole.

"This community is not looked at as one that needs a lot of culturally specific services," says Victoria Libov, a coalition member who works at the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Portland with Russian-speaking refugees. "And that's just not right."

The Slavic Coalition hopes the assessment will help the group itself survive. It is struggling, representatives say, because Russians are a diverse group and are often skittish about civic participation. And a recent political scandal involving the group's secretary didn't help.

So the coalition is pushing for a needs assessment to keep the group relevant, having seen similar projects among Latinos, African Americans and Native Americans lead to more awareness, services and growth.

"A community is like a business," Riskin says. "If you're planning to run successful business, you need a business plan. It's essential to know where you are now and where you want to be in five or 10 years. The same with community."

Community obstacles

For Russian speakers, the majority of whom are evangelical Christian refugees from Ukraine, churches have become clearinghouses of information and services. But community advocates say pastors are overwhelmed by parishioners' growing needs even as they deal with the cultural barriers that create them.

"The only weapon against the problems that this community knows is faith, but faith doesn't always work," Libov said. "From the outside, it looks like the churches are self-sufficient. But many challenges are not addressed."

Many Russian-speaking families, which tend to be large, live in poverty, said coalition Co-chairwoman Anya Valsamakakis. The elderly lead isolated lives, women face pressures as traditional caregivers, and parents have trouble controlling their children, she said.

"Our churches are doing what they can and what their role is to do," said Ihor Levkiv, Slavic Coalition co-chairman and member of the Ukrainian Bible Church Pathway to God. "But there are different things that a church can't do and that government can help with."

Coalition members say persecution under Soviet Union rule made Russian speakers distrust institutions. They are unlikely to get together or seek help outside their own circles, Libov said, a factor in the coalition's challenge to attract participation. On average, eight to 15 people attend meetings.

The December grand jury indictment of Vladimir Golovan, the coalition's former secretary, on 12 counts of forgery, theft and lying to investigators, hurt the group's efforts, further alienating immigrants. Golovan, who is awaiting trial, is suspected of gathering forged signatures to help two Portland City Council candidates try to qualify for public campaign financing.

"Golovan was a big blow for us but also a big challenge," Riskin says. "And we survived, and we became stronger."

Hoping for change

Riskin and other coalition members are planning to again approach city and county officials, seeking help to fund the needs-assessment project. And this time, they want to make their case based on the success stories of other immigrant communities.

"The needs assessment is what opened the doors to funders, it helped city and county officials to see what our needs were," said Maria Lisa Johnson, executive director for Latino Network, the organization that spearheaded a needs assessment for Latinos in 1999. The \$50,000 assessment, funded by Multnomah County, provided visibility for the community, Johnson said.

"It was a political step that we needed to take," she said. "We had been advocating for resources for some years. We informally knew what the needs were but had no backing in terms of documentation before the assessment."

The coalition anticipates similar results. It envisions, among other resources, English and citizenship classes, culturally specific mental-health services, more bilingual social workers and school staff, and more cultural training for people who work with Russian speakers.

"If we have the needs assessment, then we can justify that we need help, we can go with numbers to county and say, these people really need help," Riskin said.

Gosia Wozniacka: 503-294-5936;

gosiawozniacka@

news.oregonian.com

Edition: Sunrise

Section: Local News

Page: B01

Record Number: MERLIN_9237860

Copyright (c) 2007 Oregonian Publishing Co.