

LIMITED-ENGLISH PROFICIENT CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES: HUMAN SERVICE NEEDS, CHALLENGES AND RESOURCES

This brief examines a trend identified in the 2004 Stepping Stones report: the increase in the limited-English speaking population in Charlottesville/Albemarle public schools. In particular, the brief reviews the human service needs faced by children and their families with limited-English proficiency and the availability of local human service organizations to meet these needs. The majority of the information present in this research brief was collected through interviews with individuals at community agencies impacted by the increase in the LEP population and working towards addressing the needs of local LEP residents. Respondents were asked to identify the challenges faced by this population as well as those faced by community agencies – public and non-profit - in seeking to serve LEP residents. Report written by Blair Cantfil, University of Virginia Intern

Definition

While persons with limited-English proficiency (LEP) have varying levels of language ability, LEP may best be defined as a difficulty reading, writing, and speaking English to such an extent that it impedes an individual's successful understanding of and participation in society.¹

Population Trends and Characteristics

Out of the 12,356 students enrolled in the school system in the 2004-2005 school year, Albemarle County had 1,012 English speakers of other languages (ESOL) students, 741 of which had limited-English proficiency.² Charlottesville City schools had 250 ESOL students out of a total enrollment of 4,391 students the same year.³ School enrollment is a strong indicator of the trends in the general population, and these figures represent a 384% increase in the LEP student body over the past nine years in Albemarle, and a 555% increase over ten years in Charlottesville.

Currently, the percentage of the population in Charlottesville/Albemarle that is foreign-born is approximately 11%, as compared to 11.7% nationally.⁴ This figure may underestimate the size of this community as it may not take fully into account factors such as undocumented immigration.

The Charlottesville/Albemarle LEP community consists of immigrants, migrants, refugees, and University of Virginia scholars and their families. There is a high percentage of Hispanics in the community as well

as Asians, Eastern Europeans and Africans. Within the Albemarle County school system, 2004-2005 enrollment shows a student population that represents 87 countries and over 62 languages. Charlottesville City Schools has a student body speaking 32 different languages. An observation made by a professional working with LEP individuals is that the LEP population is "increasing-- and increasingly diversified."

Identified Challenges Faced by Residents with Limited-English Proficiency

Eight challenges faced by the LEP population were most frequently mentioned by respondents:

- 1. Language:** The ability of a limited-English speaker to participate in the American social system is impeded by a lack of English fluency. Simple tasks, such as parent-teacher conferences or visiting the doctor, become difficult when two parties do not have the capacity to communicate. According to some respondents, some of the LEP population is at a disadvantage for learning English not only because they have immigrated, but also because they may be illiterate in their own language. Many children from the LEP community are starting school behind their native peers because they do not speak English at home. Children with limited English proficiency are also less likely to come from families that can afford pre-school programs that teach basic skills such as counting or learning the alphabet.
- 2. Economic status:** According to census data, for-



foreign-born residents of Charlottesville are more likely to live below the poverty level than native-born residents, and to face financial difficulties. Nationally, in 2002, 16.6% of foreign-born residents lived below the poverty line as compared to 11.5% of native-born residents, and 20.7% of foreign-born naturalized residents were considered poor in comparison to 10.5% of native-born citizens. (These figures exclude undocumented residents who are at a higher risk of living in poverty.)⁵

Mastering English is essential to obtaining jobs that will increase economic well-being. Interviewees noted that the jobs available to limited-English speakers are primarily minimum wage service-sector jobs which provide few opportunities for economic advancement. Some immigrants do not have legal documentation, further limiting employment options. Limited-English speakers also frequently work more than one job, which limits the amount of time and flexibility they have to attend classes that would improve their skills. Respondents report that, for many LEP residents, it is difficult to find affordable childcare that parents need in order to attend classes.

3. Health care: Accessing health care is difficult for the LEP population. They are twice as likely as native-born residents to have no health insurance due to low-income, employment in jobs without benefits or ineligibility for services due to their citizenship status.⁶ Also, easy access to health care in their native languages can be difficult, often requiring advanced planning that makes “walk-ins” to health care clinics and emergencies more difficult to handle. According to some interviewees, limited-English speakers often wait until their health is in danger before seeking service, aggravating their medical conditions. Preventative care is not readily accessible, and, according to interviews, very few foreign-born residents of low socio-economic status have access to dental care. Nationally, 33% of all foreign-born residents do not have access to health insurance, compared to 13 percent of native-born residents. Of those families living in poverty, 26% of native-born residents do not have health insurance, while 55% of foreign-born residents do not.⁷ While immigrants might meet income requirements for health benefits, many do not have legal documentation to

qualify. Children of documented aliens, for instance, with income levels below 133% of the federal poverty level are likely to be eligible for FAMIS Plus (Medicaid). Undocumented aliens are not eligible for FAMIS Plus or FAMIS. However, emergency services are available through emergency Medicaid to undocumented aliens who do not qualify for full coverage, but only if their family income level is below 133% of poverty. Organizations in Charlottesville/Albemarle, such as the Charlottesville Free Clinic, are working to meet the needs of those not covered by health insurance, but report that their capacity is limited.

4. Housing: Many respondents who work with the LEP population cite access to affordable housing as a major challenge faced by their clients. Low-paying jobs limit housing options, and, as a result, limited-English speakers often must accommodate more than the legal number of people in one residence. Sources for financial aid are available, but are not always easy to access given legal and language barriers.

5. Transportation: Transportation is a major challenge to the limited-English population for two reasons. The first is that it has become increasingly difficult for LEP residents to obtain a driver’s license. Immigration regulations prevent many immigrants from acquiring social security numbers and therefore, a driver’s license (which incidentally, inhibits their ability to obtain services such as a bank account). In Charlottesville, some transportation problems relate to a reluctance to be dependent on the schedule of the bus line, as well as a reported concern that some key human service organizations, such as Albemarle County’s Department of Social Services and Housing, are not served by public transportation. Several Albemarle County neighborhoods with large immigrant populations also do not have access to public transportation. This lack of public transportation diminishes accessibility.

6. Lack of understanding of services: According to respondents, limited-English speakers may not know what aid is available to them or what documents are required to receive assistance. For instance, some residents may not know that if their children are born in the United States they are eligible to apply for health insurance. They may

also not be aware of programs to help with affordable housing. In addition, applications for services may be confusing to those who have limited English.

7. Cultural Differences: Cultural differences may present challenges to serving limited-English speakers. These differences are important to acknowledge and, in certain instances, important for LEP residents to be aware of as to avoid any conflict with U.S. laws. Translating materials into Spanish is an important first step, but as one interviewee noted, it is also important to reach people through a medium or in a setting where they are comfortable. Some members of the LEP community are refugees who, in addition to adjusting to an unfamiliar culture, may be dealing with the permanent loss of homeland and families, and in some cases, coping with post traumatic stress disorders that increase the need for a smooth transition to a new environment.

8. Fear of Immigration Laws and Police: LEP residents, especially immigrants without documentation who are in need of services, are sometimes reluctant to seek them out for fear of being “handed over” to the police. Because of this fear, crimes often go unreported as victims may consider the risk of their own deportation as too high to notify authorities.

Challenges faced by Human Service Organizations

Six challenges faced by human service organizations were most frequently mentioned by respondents:

1. Language Barriers: According to interview respondents, non-profit and public agencies face some challenges in meeting the needs of LEP residents. Language was mentioned as a primary barrier to providing services. Respondents identified a need for both materials and forms to be translated into a range of languages, and interpreters to interact with clients. Some agency staff reported that they have hired Spanish-speaking staff members as a step toward solving this problem. However, there is also the need to recognize and serve other languages. Some agency staff use telephone interpretation services to fulfill this function, but

note that these services are expensive and not as effective as conversing with clients in-person. Interpretation services are also available in Charlottesville through the International Rescue Committee (IRC) for a fee, yet human service agency program staff note that interpretation sessions must be planned in advance, which prevents the ability to use this service for “walk-ins”.

2. Limited Resources: The most frequently cited barrier to service provision was “limited resources”. The time, money, and staff required to support programs geared toward the LEP population are in short supply. Overcoming the language barrier to service is dependent on being able to afford adequate staff to handle translation and interpretation needs. Funding is also important to extend the actual services offered to meet a greater percentage of need. The demand is high, for instance, for English classes for children as well as adults. If given the resources to expand, nearly all respondents were certain that they would be able to attract and serve new clients. For instance, the “Bright Stars” preschool program is one which several respondents cited as beneficial to the development of children from low socioeconomic groups and one that could be expanded with additional resources. Because demand is high for many LEP services in the Charlottesville/ Albemarle community, some organizations conduct minimal outreach efforts, hesitant to attract clients without having the resources to expand their capacity or provide additional services. Many agencies cite “word of mouth” as their greatest advertising. According to those interviewed, waiting lists are already long and programs are often full. If capacity was increased and more extensive outreach efforts were conducted, it is likely that more families would be reached. One interviewee mentioned that as the demand for English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for the LEP population increases, there are some organizations that recognize this need and have asked to be trained to teach ESL classes. Some churches, for instance, want to be trained to help meet the ESL instruction need.

3. Legal Obligations: Legally, any organization receiving federal funding is required under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act to provide services regardless of

national origin. This includes serving people in their native language. Many agencies are aware of these obligations, but, according to respondents, not all agency staff understand their full obligations under the law, or have a plan to prepare their organization to handle the needs of the LEP population.

Future Directions

According to most respondents, **improved translation and interpretation services** would help the limited-English speaking community, as would **creating incentives to attend English classes**. Several respondents noted that **employers could sponsor their employees to attend**. There is a need to **increase awareness of services that are available** to the LEP population. Outreach efforts that include more extensive explanations of services, as well as an **increased awareness within organizations of the legal requirements for serving the LEP population**, would be beneficial. **Accessible health care, affordable housing, and improved transportation are immediate and critical needs**. Fear of police and immigration laws could be alleviated through **enhanced community outreach efforts by local law enforcement**. Fairfax County, for instance, has offered a solution by making it known that when a crime is reported, the immigration status of individuals involved will not be investigated, and the status of immigrants arrested for crimes will only be investigated if they have previously been convicted of a felony or are being charged with a violent felony. Many respondents suggested **utilizing the outreach capacity of existing service programs** to connect with the LEP community. Those organizations that conduct home visits regularly and have established trust with the LEP community might be able to disseminate information about what other services are available to them. Respondents also cite the need to **pool together community resources** to solve these problems. For instance, through **creating a more affordable and accessible shared community translation and interpretation service**, or taking advantage of individuals and organizations that have formed relationships with the LEP population to pro-

vide awareness and understanding of programs. **Organized communication and coordination between agencies** may be a productive way both to more clearly identify needs within the community as well as identify resources, such as outreach and language capabilities, that each has the potential to share. **Holding forums or meetings with multiple agencies** to initiate this type of dialogue has been cited as a productive practice. Organizations are able to benefit from learning about each others' effective strategies and knowledge.

It is also suggested that the **City of Charlottesville and County of Albemarle should engage limited English speaking residents directly** to understand and respond to their needs, and **work with existing coalitions --or establish an ad-hoc task force -- to identify areas where coordination and resources can improve services**.

Methodology

Information was collected through interviews with human service providers in the Charlottesville/Albemarle area as well as from available national and state databases for the purpose of placing the trends in a broader context. Respondents included: Judy Bartlett, The Rural Health Outreach Program, Blue Ridge Medical Center; Susan Donovan, International Rescue Committee; Susan Erno, Charlottesville City Schools Adult Learning Center; Jim Hart, Salvation Army; Cliff Haury, Piedmont Virginia Community College; Selene Mak, Blue Ridge ESL; Mary Mullen, Literacy Volunteers of America; Peggy Brown Paviour, Thomas Jefferson Health District; Sharon Root and Jean Wollenburg, Albemarle County Schools; Andrew Turner, Virginia Justice Center; John Freeman, Albemarle Department of Social Services; and Judy Smith, Jefferson Area CHIP.

¹ "Limited English Proficiency Program" Child Find, Idaho Department of Education, April, 2004. http://www.sd171.k12.id.us/pro/limited_english_proficiency.htm

² Albemarle County Public Schools official website: "Fast Facts." <http://www.k12albemarle.org/home.html> and the Virginia Department of Education Report of Limited English Proficient Students Receiving Services as of September 30, 2004.

³ Charlottesville City Public Schools official website: "Fast Facts." http://www.ccs.k12.va.us/CCS_facts.html and information provided by Bev Catlin, Coordinator of Instruction, Charlottesville City Schools.

⁴ Larsen, Luke J.: The Foreign-Born Population in the United States: 2003, US Census Bureau, August, 2004. <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/p20-551.pdf>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ "Acclimation of Virginia's Foreign-Born Population" Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee, November, 2003. <http://jlarc.state.va.us/Summary/Rpt300/Acclim.htm>

⁷ Haskins, Ron, Mark Greenberg, and Shawn Fremstad: "Federal Policy for Immigrant Children: Room for Common Ground?" *The Future of Children*, Volume 14, Number 2, Summer 2004.