

Integration proves hard for immigrants

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A chilly banquet hall near the warehouses and big-box stores of Merivale Road was the site of passionate discussion yesterday on the integration of immigrants in Ottawa.

Research shows that immigrants are increasingly failing to find a footing in the city, participants heard during a day-long symposium organized by the Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization (OCISO) to mark its 30th anniversary. Despite being more educated than the average Canadian, immigrants have a harder time finding work, and almost half of all newcomers to Ottawa are living in poverty,

The symposium was not a recitation of sad, dry numbers and facts, though. Instead, OCISO arranged small discussion groups in which participants, most of whom were immigrants or people who worked with immigrants, shared their perspectives on the theme "A Place for Everyone."

"We're talking about building a community that has space for all, and right now, Ottawa does not have space for all," OCISO executive director Hamdi Mohamed said. "More than 6,000 immigrants come to Ottawa every year, chosen specifically because we need them and their skills. When they get here, they are driving cabs or delivering pizzas or they are unemployed."

For many, it was a rare chance to talk about the immigrant experience, and it generated an emotional response. Minutes into the first session, one participant stood up to say the conversations made her proud to be an immigrant. Later, a member of a panel discussion said that, for the first time in six years in the city, he was proud to be a refugee.

Subsequent discussions focused on finding ways to bridge the divide between recent newcomers and the wider community, beginning with such basics as jobs and civic engagement.

The keynote speaker, Hydro Ottawa CEO Rosemarie Leclair, cited efforts being made to overcome employment hurdles. Ms. Leclair is co-chair of the Employers' Council of Champions, a group of 32 Ottawa-area employers -- including banks, technology companies and public agencies -- that advocates for skilled immigrants. Last month, the council released its Employer's Guide to Integrating Immigrants into the Workplace, which gives extensive advice on assessing the skills of immigrant job applicants, understanding cultural differences and creating a welcoming workplace.

"Employers who are not accustomed to recruiting, hiring and retaining newcomers often face challenges in getting started," Ms. Leclair said. "It's one thing to embrace diversity as a concept, it's quite another to achieve organizational diversity and leverage it for success."

By the end of the day, participants had come up with a list of ideas and programs they felt might help speed up integration for newcomers, including expanded mentorship for job-seekers and host programs to foster connections with the wider community. OCISO is planning to collect the ideas and use them in its programming and planning next year.

"A lot of people have their own little corners of the world and they're simply not exposed to immigrants or their daily lives," Ms. Mohamed said. However, when OCISO made a public appeal for help after a group of Karen refugees from Burma arrived in 2006, "people arrived with furniture and supplies by the truckload. So we know the feeling is in there. It just needs to come out."

The anniversary celebrations continued last night with a gala dinner. Awards were handed out to community members who had made exceptional efforts to integrate immigrants.