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Montgomery County immigrants want to learn English, but face wait lists

Report highlights need for stronger literacy effort

by Marcus Moore | Staff Writer

Ada Lemus faced extreme difficulties when she worked at a beauty salon in the county.

Lemus' boss would communicate with her routinely, she explained, but all she could do was look him in the face and try to decipher what he was saying.

That was until Lemus decided to take the initiative and learn to speak English, she said Monday.

"I felt so bad when I came to the country," Lemus, who is from Honduras, said in English. "I have my life in my country, but I wanted to have a better life."

Lemus' story isn't uncommon, according to a report from the Montgomery Coalition for Adult English Literacy.

More than 2,000 adults in the county want to learn English, but are unable to do so because of long wait lists to get into English language programs, according to the report, the first ever from the nonprofit group.

"The truth is that they're highly motivated, they want to learn English, but the opportunities just aren't there," said Rachel Glass, executive director of the Montgomery Coalition for Adult English Literacy.

There are roughly 130,000 limited-English speakers in the county, according to the coalition. The problem, Glass said, is that there aren't enough spaces for the residents who want to learn the English language.

Limited-English speakers who can't comprehend the language face a number of challenges, Glass said. They often are unable to find work, which then makes it difficult for them to support their families.

Also, Glass said, limited-English speakers are unable to help their children with their homework, speak with their neighbors or even call 911 for emergency help.

According to the coalition's report, more than 80,000 adult residents lack the basic literacy to complete a job application.

"If 80,000 residents don't have the ability to fill out a job application, we'll have some serious problems," she said.

According to the coalition's report, 30 percent of adult limited-English speakers live in neighborhoods identified for greatest economic risk.

On average, those proficient in English earn up to \$15,000 more annually than non-English speakers,

according to information the coalition pulled from the Urban Institute research group.

Flor Martinez, herself an English language learner, said scheduling conflicts make it difficult for immigrants to take the English classes offered through the countywide literacy coalition, which are strictly at night in various community programs throughout the county.

The county's Linkages to Learning program only offers evening classes, and the Literacy Council of Montgomery County offers free ESOL classes during the day. Montgomery College's adult literacy program offers day, evening and night classes for as much as \$100 per class.

"A lot of people have children," said Martinez, who works as a language tutor at the Community Ministries of Rockville.

And, some English language learners who are able to take the classes later face challenges. For instance, managers have unknowingly switched their work schedules to the night shift, which makes it tougher to take the classes.

Now, Lemus takes English classes at the Community Ministries of Rockville twice a week. She now has a new job at a Dollar Tree store and recently was promoted to assistant manager because of her improved ability to speak English, Lemus said.

Still, Lemus said she has grand aspirations of becoming an English teacher in Montgomery County.

"When I started to learn English, it helped me a lot," she said. "My life has changed."