

## **Your Culture Is Valued Here**

**Lessons from the DHS Immigrant and  
International Advisory Council**



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Over the past several years, the Pittsburgh area's resurgent economy has enhanced its attractiveness as a place in which to live and work. As a result, Allegheny County, which had not experienced the growth in diversity of other major American cities in recent decades, is beginning to attract increasing numbers of immigrants and internationals who are making the region their home. While this growth is still modest when compared to that of other major metropolitan areas, it is significant enough to be reversing the downward trend of **past years** ([www.pittsburghtoday.org/view\\_PopulationEstimates.html](http://www.pittsburghtoday.org/view_PopulationEstimates.html)).

In 2007, seeking to ensure that its services were culturally competent and accessible to immigrants and internationals, the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) established an Immigrant and International Advisory Council, staffed by Barbara Murock of DHS and composed of an ever-increasing group of stakeholders. Five years later, many of the leading players in the Pittsburgh-area international community credit the Council with making the region more immigrant-friendly on several fronts.

"Our work would be more difficult without the Council," declared Adriana Dobrzycka, community outreach and inclusion manager for Vibrant Pittsburgh, an area nonprofit that seeks to strengthen the region by enhancing and promoting cultural diversity in the workforce. "There wasn't even a Listserv [of immigrant-serving organizations] before it existed. The Council is creating space for dialogue on a scale that would not be happening otherwise by facilitating connections, multiplying scarce resources, and creating visibility for our efforts, all of which have a huge impact on the community.

"Many of our immigrants come from places where government was not to be trusted," Dobrzycka continued. "Thus it makes a big difference when a government agency here opens its doors as DHS has done through the Immigrant and International Advisory Council." And for those immigrants who had grown used to dependence on government, the Council has supported self-sufficiency and increased independence.

“The Council has made internationals feel they are valued,” said Rufus Idris, a Nigerian-born economic consultant now based in the East Liberty section of Pittsburgh. “We feel that we are part of the system and that the county is sensitive to our values. This has helped to attract people here. When people call me [about coming to Pittsburgh], I can say this is a good place to live because immigrants have a voice and there is a program to help them survive here. And it’s not the Council speaking for the immigrants, it’s the immigrants speaking themselves.”

“In Pittsburgh, there are resources that people don’t know about because they are not visible,” Dobrzycka added. “At every Council meeting, someone brings a new perspective and broadens our understanding of what is available.”

Local refugee-serving agencies agree that, in addition to creating and strengthening collaborations with other community resources, the Council has given participant communities a voice and has implemented projects that no member agency could do on its own.

Khara Timsina, who represents the largest recently arriving refugee group—the Bhutanese, now numbering nearly 4,000 in Allegheny County—summed up many of his colleagues’ attitudes: “The Advisory Council is one place where I can go and get suggestions if I have a problem in my community. It is a privilege for the Bhutanese community, having come so recently, to have the chance to be in the Council. This carries a big meaning for us.”

The Bhutanese community’s appreciation for the region and all it has to offer can be seen in its rapid growth. The local Bhutanese community is swelling not just through direct resettlement but also through secondary migration—that is, relocation here by people who originally landed elsewhere in the United States but who learned from friends or relatives who are thriving here that Allegheny County is a great place in which to live and work.

Yinka Aganga-Williams, Executive Director of AJAPO (one of Pittsburgh’s four refugee resettlement agencies), said that one of the best measures of the Council’s success is the calls she doesn’t get any more, over families fighting with the child welfare system or an immigrant falling afoul of the law. “DHS didn’t just give us lip service,” she explained. “They put community organizations on the Council and gave us an office that takes care of us. If I have a problem, I know I can call someone who will help those involved to understand the cultural situation. This is a great plus.”

### **PITTSBURGH’S PLACE FOR CROSS-CULTURAL COLLABORATION**

The idea of an Immigrant and International Advisory Council grew out of a series of listening sessions that DHS held in 2007 to identify the needs of the region’s growing international population. Given the opportunity to speak up, representatives of various ethnic groups and the agencies serving them responded loudly and energetically.

“Most of the resettlement services given to refugees end within six to eight months,” said Aganga-Williams, whose experience has been mostly with Africans arriving here. “In that time,

you can find them a job, but these are families whose children have never been in formal education, and who don't know how to navigate the health system or other services that Americans might use. We can't provide effective services for them without the county's support."

Leslie Aizenman of Jewish Family & Children's Service, another refugee resettlement agency, had ample evidence of cross-cultural difficulties. "We are hand-holding refugees through the system when they first arrive, so we observe how professionals like teachers or doctors are often unprepared and lack resources to address their needs," she said. "And other immigrants [who are not refugees] don't have a caseworker to help them at all."

Riffat Chughtai, executive director of Pittsburgh Muslim Family Support Services, had a different set of concerns. "Muslims here had no faith in non-Muslims due to things that happened after 9/11," Chughtai stated. "In custody cases, in child welfare, and in the emergency room, they felt threatened. We needed a two-way educational process."

The listening sessions resulted in a proposal to create a council to advise DHS on the needs of those coming to Pittsburgh from other countries. Chughtai and Andy Pugh of the Welcome Center for Immigrants and Internationals, formed by Jewish Family & Children's Service in 2005 to assist new arrivals and maximize their value to the region, became the first co-chairs. The Welcome Center has since expanded to become Vibrant Pittsburgh.

Importantly, DHS filled the Council not just with service providers, but also with representatives of the cultural groups receiving services. It thus showed internationals that their voice was valued and gave them a chance to network with each other and with numerous helpful resources. The invitation was received enthusiastically, to say the least.

"Nobody had pulled the international communities together before," explained Barb Murock. "As a result, it was hard to start Council meetings because people were networking so much. We instituted a policy of holding networking for half an hour before meetings. Even then, to get meetings going on time I hold a raffle, and to receive a ticket people have to be in their seats when the meeting is scheduled to start."

### **MAKING DHS CULTURALLY COMPETENT**

The Council held its first meeting in September 2008, with 20 members. Among the many needs presented, it chose to start with two: cultural competence training, and improving access to translation and interpretation services.

Delivering human services cross-culturally has a number of hidden pitfalls. Practices typical in America, such as offering a handshake or making steady eye contact, can be misinterpreted by people from other cultures. Needing counseling or child welfare services can be a source of shame or derision. Some cultural groups have very different views of such issues as corporal punishment, sleeping arrangements, or school attendance expectations from most Americans. Foster care placement decisions had caused bitterness in some immigrant communities.

Moreover, cultural norms often discourage newcomers from accepting help. “There is a lot of depression among older immigrants,” said Russian-born Council member Natasha Novikova, an outpatient therapist for Mercy Behavioral Health, “but they have a hard time going to see a doctor, because they consider it something that others will judge them harshly for. And not being able to care for one’s elders can carry a lot of guilt [for younger family members]. So being sensitive and explaining that they don’t have to be ashamed of getting help, or that it’s not illegal to accept payments to support an elderly family member, is quite significant.”

The Council developed a cultural competence training curriculum, which its members have delivered, on a volunteer basis, to several hundred DHS aging, child welfare and behavioral health staff, in addition to speaking at various forums and conferences.

“It took us a year to develop the program,” Chughtai recalled, “because we wanted to cover a broad range of ethnic groups and we wanted at least two-thirds of the trainers to be immigrants. When someone speaks from personal experience, it resonates better. Along with cultural differences, the major issues are similar for all the groups: They don’t know the American system and the English language, and they don’t understand idioms or body language.

“Certain cultural issues were very important. For example, in some cultures, the father is responsible for the family, but caseworkers are taught to interpret it as a red flag [of possible domestic abuse] if the mother won’t say much.

“Every time we give the training, people say they have learned a lot. You might be able to learn about cultures from websites, but role-playing or being able to ask questions of people who are themselves immigrants makes a difference.”

Tawnya Burke, a care management supervisor in DHS’s Area Agency on Aging, attended a Council lunch-and-learn session on cultural competence issues and subsequently arranged a training event for her staff. At the time, the staff was accustomed to working with Russian immigrants but was just beginning to receive case assignments for the Bhutanese and Burmese communities. “The training was of great value, as we don’t have much time for staff development on the various cultural groups within the county,” Burke said.

Similarly, since many refugees with intellectual disabilities had never been diagnosed or had received little assistance in their countries of origin, the Council held a forum to connect immigrants with providers of services that would be helpful. “It was a great opportunity for personal connection and dialogue in which we gained a better understanding of the unique challenges in supporting immigrants with disabilities,” said Mary Figlar of DHS’s Office of Intellectual Disabilities.

Marco Gemignani, a psychology professor at Duquesne University who has started a mental health clinic for Spanish speakers, stressed the Council’s value in making the training effective. “It is not enough to set up a program,” he noted. “You need to motivate people who work with immigrants to attend the program and take it seriously. The Council can be influential in the general culture and influence priorities as to what is considered important.”

*Council Member Feature***MiRan Surh**

**M**iRan Surh knows how intimidating the immigrant experience can be. When she came from Korea in 1982 to study at Seton Hill College in Greensburg, she rarely left campus.

Ten years later, she landed in Pittsburgh again when her husband's U.S.-based firm transferred him here. Trained in special education and social work, Surh is now well equipped to help others. She works as Director of Development at the Emmaus Community of Pittsburgh, a nonprofit serving people with intellectual disabilities. In addition, she has volunteered as a legal advocate in domestic violence cases, trained staff at women's shelters in working with immigrant populations, and helped to develop a training video on cultural competence.

"Many Asian immigrants will not come forward if they are victims of domestic violence," Surh pointed out. "They think they will bring shame on the whole family, so at the very beginning you have to earn their trust."

While studying social work at the University of Pittsburgh, Surh completed an internship at the Pittsburgh Welcome Center. When the Council was created, Surh agreed to serve at then-Welcome Center director Andy Pugh's encouragement. As a Council member, she is now seen as an important resource by the estimated 5,000 Korean families who have settled in the Pittsburgh area.

"Before [the Council], the county was meaningless to most Koreans," Surh stated.

"Because of the Council, we know what resources are available to our communities. People from DHS offices — aging, housing, police, health care, employment, immigration law, mental health, intellectual disabilities — have come to the Council to explain how their programs work. Now, if Koreans living here have a question or problem, we have a direct line to get support."

## NARROWING THE LANGUAGE GAPS

The Council's Interpretation and Translation Committee pursued parallel tracts in addressing the needs of non-English speakers. English classes are taught by a number of organizations represented on the Council: the Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council (GPLC), Goodwill and the Allegheny Intermediate Unit. However, recognizing the time and effort needed to achieve competence in a second language, as well as the barriers of challenging work schedules, limited transportation, and lack of previous formal education, the Council also focuses on the immediate and ongoing need for translation services.

DHS trained front-line staff in the use of Language Line, a telephone-based interpreter service for social services agencies and health care providers. The Council worked with other agencies to improve their cross-cultural service delivery, and the committee researched the idea of a language bank—a centralized source of trained, locally available interpreters. A model for the language bank was developed with broad stakeholder involvement, and students from the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public and International Affairs helped with the creation of a marketing plan.

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 requires recipients of federal funding to provide meaningful access for people with limited English proficiency. But ensuring quality service involves much more than enforcing the right to an interpreter. The telephone-based services provided by Language Line meet legal requirements, but arranging for a personal interpreter is preferable; the Language Line staffer may not know the client's particular dialect and may still have trouble understanding. "And trust is important," Aganga-Williams explained. "You're telling a refugee to talk about something confidential to a face he cannot see."

On the other hand, patients can be reluctant to disclose information to a local interpreter who may also be a relative or neighbor. "You always have to ask the consumer, 'Do you want this person to interpret for you?'" Aganga-Williams stressed.

Supported by United Way funding for two of the Council's member organizations, the language bank—officially named Language Link—was launched in summer 2012 with an initial team of 15 interpreters in three languages. The Center for Deaf and Hearing Services, drawing on its experience in providing sign-language interpreters, is administering the program.

The committee's efforts have dramatically affected immigrant patients' experience in the health care sector. Leslie Aizenman recalled that, before the Council's involvement, doctor appointments were often a challenge due to difficulties in obtaining interpretation services. "Refugees and caseworkers would get tied up for hours in delays and debates over who would provide the interpreter," Aizenman said. "Now we call and say that this client will need a Nepali speaker, and when we arrive they often have hired someone to be available in person; if in-patient care is provided, the interpreter follows the patient through recovery. We used to have a battle every time we walked in; now, especially with the doctors we use regularly, it's much more seamless."

In response to issues raised by this committee, UPMC, Allegheny County's largest health care system, has created its own advisory group on translation and interpretation issues, composed largely of Council members. "Community partners tell us what they and international patients are looking for, and we partner with our patient care groups to ensure that we provide quality, culturally competent care," said Jamie Scarano of the UPMC Center for Inclusion, which has also been a presenter at a Council meeting. Through this collaboration, UPMC has approved the Council-inspired Language Link as a provider of translation and interpretation services.

Samaria Arzola, director of Pittsburgh's Latino Family Center, frequently had to advocate for Spanish speakers who could not access interpretation services at UPMC and other local health care centers. But that problem no longer occurs on a regular basis. What made the difference initially, Arzola said, "is that I could call DHS and say what was going on, and [through the Council] they could help us make contact with the hospital and work with us until we got a good result." Now Arzola is part of the UPMC advisory group, helping to make its services welcoming rather than intimidating for her clients and others with limited English proficiency.

Pittsburgh has also developed an international-friendly primary care facility, the nonprofit Squirrel Hill Health Center, which provides primary medical, behavioral health and dental services. The Health Center has staff competent in Nepali, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, Hebrew and sign language; many were immigrants or refugees themselves. Nearly half of its patients speak a primary language other than English. Health Center Program Coordinator and Council member Meghan Powers noted that a health center specializing in cross-cultural services can bridge important gaps in addition to language: "Some refugees tend to wait for the doctor to call them. We have to do a lot of orientation on how to interact with a doctor's office, what to do when you need a refill, and why—for example, for latent tuberculosis—you might have to take medication even if you don't feel sick." The Health Center also assists with referrals for social services.

### **Creative deployment of AmeriCorps**

Powers is a product of another highly successful Council endeavor. After hearing consistently that immigrant-serving entities lacked the staff capacity to meet their clients' needs, the Council proposed deploying a unit of AmeriCorps members among multiple local agencies. The Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council (GPLC), which had prior AmeriCorps experience, agreed to become the grant applicant and won approval to start the program, called COMPASS AmeriCorps, with 10 participants in fall 2010.

Powers, a West Virginia University graduate with an interest in refugee law, was in the first cohort. "The Council makes the experience a lot more fulfilling and valuable for the AmeriCorps members," she said, "because you don't just serve one site—you see the whole community working together."

This year, 23 AmeriCorps members are working with 10 Council agencies, mostly assisting with intensive case management. "Often it's hard to find great placement sites for AmeriCorps members," said MaryRose Walko, who coordinates the program for GPLC, "but here the



placement sites were built in from the start. It's great to have new members coming in each year with a renewed sense of excitement. And the AmeriCorps members are connecting the organizations further as they spend time together on team-building and service projects."

"We have two full-time case managers for 190 clients. That's a lot of work," said Kheir Mugwaneza, a native Rwandan who directs the refugee program for Northern Area Companies. "AmeriCorps members are very helpful in supporting our case managers in a way that service providers' budgets can afford."

### HELPING REFUGEES DECIPHER THEIR NEW WORLD

As one drives into the Prospect Park section of the Borough of Whitehall, the change is immediately noticeable. Amid Pittsburgh's largely white south suburbs is a bus stop that looks, from the many ethnicities represented by its passengers, as if it belongs at the United Nations. An international grocery, recently opened by Iraqi refugees who are now U.S. citizens, sits across the street.

That brief moment of cultural disorientation that Pittsburghers can now experience in Prospect Park is what refugees experience everywhere following their arrival in the United States. "Refugees are at times overwhelmed by the unfamiliar possibilities," said Marco Gemignani, who pairs Duquesne psychology students with local refugee families as part of a service-learning class he teaches. "It can be an issue as innocuous as knowing the difference between one percent and skim milk. But others are more serious, like knowing their legal rights. Some have been charged huge fees by cell phone or Internet companies." Elderly members of extended families who lived communally for years in refugee camps struggle with having relatives a block or even a floor away.

Sometimes the adjustment needs defy the stereotypes. "We need activities for our youth," stated Bhutanese community representative Khara Timsina, "because our elementary and middle-school children get less homework here than we used to give them in the refugee camp."

In this context, refugee resettlement organizations are stretched to the limit—and grateful for the Council's role in making culturally sensitive services available and readily accessible.

"We contracted to resettle 200 refugees a year, but we resettled 226 for the 2012 federal fiscal year," said Aizenman of Jewish Family & Children's Service, "plus helping several hundred others already here with employment or legal issues. Lately, many more people are arriving with medical issues and other limitations that make it harder to place them in jobs. We are so busy getting newly arriving people settled in, there is no way we could put together services on our own like those that the Council is developing together."

Pittsburgh is a relatively attractive destination for refugees, according to what Mugwaneza of Northern Area Companies has observed, thanks to its affordable housing, reliable public transportation, and availability of entry-level jobs. "But we resettlement providers can't handle

all the work that needs to be done for them,” he added. “The supporting services available for refugees here are remarkable, and the Council is a big part of this.”

One of the Council’s most visible contributions has been its role in helping the Bhutanese community establish a registered nonprofit organization. Efforts to reserve public meeting rooms, participate in local cultural events, and advocate collectively were all hindered because the Bhutanese had no identifiable organization. Through the Advisory Council, they were linked with students from the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Pittsburgh who helped them through the process and shared their expertise in organizational development. Now, the same process is under way for Pittsburgh’s Somali Bantu community. “We know that social support and social networks are important to positive mental health,” Murock stated, “and this connectedness, both within cultural communities and to the broader community, is a natural way to prevent or ameliorate social isolation that leads to behavioral health issues.”

Some refugees arrive in the United States with excellent professional skills that, due to cultural gaps and lack of local connections, are hard to transfer into similar employment here. In response to this need, the Council launched a Refugee Career Mentoring Program in 2011. This collaborative program links each participant to a mentor in his or her field and offers monthly group sessions on general job-search issues.

“As a job developer, I saw clients who came here with advanced degrees and experience but who could not secure the employment they were looking for,” Mugwaneza observed. “Now we are already seeing people become connected with local professionals and getting jobs.”

## REACHING THE YOUTH

One Council committee, initially formed to address foster care issues involving international families, gradually evolved to have a broader focus on preventing child welfare issues from developing. This committee has included two cross-cultural DHS-funded family support centers: Prospect Park, opened in 2007 and operated by South Hills Interfaith Ministries, and the Latino Family Center, managed by the Allegheny Intermediate Unit.

The establishment of the Latino Family Center unleashed a flood of interest from Pittsburgh’s growing but geographically dispersed Spanish-speaking community. When the Center opened in July 2009, Arzola was hoping to enroll 20 families during the first six months; instead, the center was fully subscribed with 60 families—from 27 different ZIP codes—within two months. Families travel to the South Side for some programs, including a new Latino-focused youth mentoring program inspired by the Council’s Children and Youth Committee and conducted by Goodwill, but most of the center’s assistance is home-based family support. Staff and AmeriCorps members also help families with translating documents, making appointments and accessing social services.

*Council Member Feature***Marco Gemignani**

**M**arco Gemignani is fluent in three languages. Born in Italy, he studied at the University of Barcelona, Spain, and then earned his Ph.D. in psychology at the University of Florida. When he arrived at Duquesne University, he didn't need a cultural orientation, but the Council has been invaluable to him for other reasons.

"There are few people working on immigration issues in academic psychology," Gemignani explained. "The Council has been a great place to network and find people to support and encourage me."

Upon discovering that the Pittsburgh area lacked mental health services for Spanish speakers, Gemignani felt that he had the "response-ability" to start such a clinic, which opened in September 2011. The Council provided strategic support throughout the process, connecting him with potentially interested funders and other resources, such as ways to access discounted medications for lower-income clients.

"Much of my work involves providing resources to my clients—a health clinic, a family center, a drug and alcohol program, a lawyer with a particular specialty," he said. "The Council has helped me make contact with these services, and now we refer clients in each direction."

In both his clinical work and his teaching, Gemignani addresses the unique psychological, emotional and socialization challenges that confront immigrants to the United States. "A big principle in my classes," he said, "is to encourage not assimilation but integration, where people learn the ways of America without forgetting their own language, history and culture. After all, they will still be considered different by Americans; for instance, they will always have a different accent. Integration is important psychologically so that people don't feel so displaced. Instead of being afraid of difference, we try to encourage embracing difference. Mental health is essential to enabling immigrants' integration.

"But there is a need, in the general population, to increase sensitivity and raise consciousness that immigrants should be welcomed. Pittsburgh is not an easy city for that, due to our relative lack of exposure. The Council has been effective in communicating that immigration is good for our city."

At the Prospect Park Family Center, youth mentoring, also originally initiated with Goodwill through the Children and Youth Committee, has exploded under Casey Rich, who came to the center as a COMPASS AmeriCorps member and has since joined the staff. Prospect Park conducts four separate youth groups, distinguished by age (between middle and high school) and gender, with Bhutanese, Burmese, African and Iraqi natives participating. The weekly get-togethers include field trips, crafts and soccer games, plus time to discuss youth concerns such as cultural adjustment, school issues, college plans or romantic relationships.

“The kids are coming from different places geographically but the same place emotionally,” Rich noted. “When they get together, they see that they have things in common despite their ethnic differences. We’re teaching them responsibility and how to make friends with people of other cultures. I have especially seen the high-school boys grow in confidence by having role models from outside the community.”

While she explained the program, a real-life illustration of the Bhutanese immigrants’ spirit materialized in front of the ground-floor apartment that has become the Prospect Park Family Center’s modest office. Eight Bhutanese teenagers, who are part of the Bhutanese community’s youth council, walked by carrying trash bags, using their free time—on their own initiative—to clean up the neighborhood.

### **CULTURALLY SENSITIVE CHILD CARE**

Two other needs—training immigrants in entrepreneurship and providing culturally sensitive child care for their children—have intersected in another recent initiative. Through the Council and the efforts of DHS intern Krissy Kimura, 20 immigrant women have been recruited who are interested in providing multicultural child care. Council member agencies secured grant funds to cover prospective caregivers’ screenings, clearances, and equipment such as toys and sleeping mats. Working with Southwestern PA Keys, a series of training sessions is under way for those interested in becoming an in-home child care provider.

“We wanted immigrant mothers to be able to go to work and have quality, affordable, culturally sensitive child care for their children, and to help other women bring income into their homes,” explained Courtney Macurak, director of the Prospect Park Family Center, who recruited seven trainees.

The project also has an excellent resource in Rufus Idris, who once received World Bank sponsorship for his proposal to turn leftover sawdust from Nigerian mills into marketable products. Idris, with a wealth of experience in business startups, now runs a micro-business assistance center known as CEED (Christian Evangelistic Economic Development) and serves on the Council’s Immigrant Child Care Advisory Committee. Immigrant families, Idris said, fear that people with a different cultural context might misinterpret their children’s behaviors, so they prefer to leave their children with someone who understands their culture, food choices, dress and games; thus, the new child care providers will have a ready-made clientele. Closely aligned with CEED’s mission, the child care project will be managed by CEED beginning in 2013.

### Council Member Feature

## Samaria Arzola

If someone whose own arrival here was rocky is in the best position to relate to newcomers, Samaria Arzola exceeds the standard. A Puerto Rican native, Arzola had no idea what she was getting into when she and her family arrived in Monroeville in 2001: “A company came to Puerto Rico recruiting nurses. My interview was in Spanish. When I got here, I was not competent in English, and there were no Spanish speakers around me. The company gave my family and me housing for one month, in a Holiday Inn with a microwave and a small refrigerator.

“I came on a one-year provisional license. In Puerto Rico, you can attempt the nursing boards twice, but when I failed the test here (which I was forced to take in English), they said I could be a nursing assistant for \$7 an hour. By then I could read enough English to see ads for nursing assistants at \$10 an hour. So I declined the offer and took a job doing laundry for a hotel. A woman living there, who was working at West Penn Hospital, taught me English and, when she thought I was ready, got me into the patient care assistant course so I could work there.”

Due to her roles as a health advisor to Head Start and an active parent at another DHS family support center, Arzola was invited to join the Latino Family Center planning committee. Fellow committee members observed her abilities and eventually persuaded her to apply for the director position. Arzola was also asked to join the Immigrant and International Advisory Council, where she has participated on the Interpretation and Translation and Youth Committees.

“My families don’t speak for themselves,” Arzola said. “Tell them they’re not entitled to an interpreter and they will just not go to their appointment. The Council has opened doors by helping us to speak up as a group.

“When the Council meets, even though we serve different immigrant populations, most of the issues are the same. We are one big community working together to overcome problems and make things better for all the families we serve. I don’t feel alone—when I need something, I can bring it up in a meeting or call another member, and we can think it through together.”

## A Long List of Accomplishments

Major accomplishments of the DHS Immigrant and International Advisory Council's first five years:

- More than 60 educational presentations about DHS programs and other community resources at the Council's quarterly meetings (since September 2008)
- Inspired the training of more than 150 DHS staff in use of the Language Line translation service
- Establishment of local language bank, officially known as Language Link
- Support for translation of DHS brochures and parenting publications into Spanish
- Development of cultural competence training, delivered to hundreds of DHS employees and other health care and social service staff
- Significant improvement in availability of translation and interpretation services in health care settings
- Creation of AmeriCorps project that now deploys 23 members a year in 12 immigrant-serving agencies
- Provided hands-on, creative learning opportunities for over 20 interns from local universities
- Training for immigrant parents on U.S. laws and parenting expectations
- Increased cultural sensitivity in child welfare situations involving international families
- Creation of a Refugee Career Mentoring Program
- Launch of Family Child Care Project, equipping 20 internationals to deliver in-home, culturally sensitive child care
- Support for international youth mentoring programs at three local sites serving more than 100 youth
- Assistance with development of the Bhutanese Community Association of Pittsburgh and the Somali Bantu Community Association
- Create a resource guide on immigrant eligibility for publicly funded programs

**Information about the DHS Immigrants and Internationals Institute and resources for immigrants and internationals in our region can be found at [www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/imm-intern/index.aspx](http://www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/imm-intern/index.aspx).**

### IT'S GOOD FOR ALLEGHENY COUNTY

Becoming more international-friendly is good for any city's economy, but especially important for an urban center like Pittsburgh, which has been hampered in the recent past by declining population.

"Diverse immigration brings talents that we might not have available here," said Dobrzycka, herself a former Welcome Center client who now makes the case for immigrant-friendliness every day on behalf of Vibrant Pittsburgh. "It also brings a diversity of ideas, which leads to greater opportunity for innovation and prosperity. Immigrants may have a humble start as they learn English and try to get situated, but often they are brilliant people who are looking for an opportunity and who will give back. Many are willing to fill jobs that are going unfilled. When immigrants are skilled and knowledgeable enough to take on professional jobs, that also contributes to our collective well-being."

Mugwaneza, who came to Pittsburgh in a group of 80 Rwandans invited to study at LaRoche College, stressed not only what Americans can learn from other cultures, but the appreciative spirit that international arrivals bring. "American values like freedom, equality and democracy—immigrants want the same things," he stated. "Most of them are here because they could not get those things where they were living."

Riffat Chughtai observed that immigrants typically "are very hard-working, because they come from places where they worked hard and often could still not survive. The refugees who come here are itching to start working somewhere and put their best foot forward. Their mindset is not just about themselves but long term, thinking about helping their children to become successful. Their determination to work hard makes our city and county more productive."

Marco Gemignani agreed: "We need immigrants in Pittsburgh. They tend to be energetic and passionate, often at the peak of their productivity, with a strong sense of entrepreneurship. Immigration offers many benefits to any city that can attract them. Some scholars talk about an 'immigration paradox' for many immigrants—although immigrants tend to come from disadvantaged backgrounds, they quickly improve their socioeconomic status and live longer than local populations. We can all benefit from the initiative, vitality and cultural richness that they offer."

Over five years of working intensively with immigrant and international groups, Murock has developed great respect for the commitment of immigrant leaders to their local communities and of organizations addressing the multiple needs of more recent immigrants. She describes the purpose of the Council as twofold: 1) enabling immigrants and internationals in need to connect to existing services, and 2) identifying unmet needs and collaboratively developing ways to address those needs.

"We want to do more than meet immediate service needs," Murock said. "We want to help immigrants build on their strengths, achieve self-sufficiency, and integrate into the community. That is the goal of what DHS does."