



INTERFAITH COMMUNITIES FOR DIALOGUE (ICD)

WELCOMING THE STRANGER: THE CHALLENGE OF EMBRACING IMMIGRANTS

Part 2: Immigrants in Fairfax County: Challenges and Opportunities

In the second of our two-part series, we brought the topic of immigration closer to home. The goal of this dialogue was to learn about immigration trends here in Fairfax County, including demographics, challenges to the community and to the immigrants themselves. Our guest speaker was Karol Escalante, Director of Immigrant Community Affairs for Fairfax County.

A native of Honduras, Ms. Escalante moved to the United States in 2015. She served as a diplomat in the Foreign Service of Honduras for nine years, with her last post in Chicago as Consul General of Honduras. Ms. Escalante, who is now a U.S. citizen, identifies herself as an immigrant, which she defines as “a person living in a country other than the country in which they were born.” Legal status does not matter, she said. Immigrants include U.S. citizens, resident aliens, asylum seekers, people under temporary protected status and those who are undocumented, among other groups.

More than 350,000 immigrants live in Fairfax County, making up roughly 30 percent of the total population. As Ms. Escalante explained, these newcomers invigorate the labor force, start new businesses and with each sequential wave of immigrants, enrich our county culturally. Nevertheless, they face many challenges starting new lives in our county: learning English, securing work, securing housing, navigating transportation and accessing services. Perhaps the biggest hurdle to overcome is the fear that they, or someone in their family, may be deported. Because of this, immigrants are often reluctant to seek the very services Fairfax County provides to help them adjust to life here.

To counter this fear and uncertainty, the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors in 2021 adopted a public trust and confidentiality policy, better known as the Trust Policy. Through this policy, Fairfax County commits to protecting the rights of all residents, regardless of their immigration or citizenship status. It guarantees that everyone has an equal opportunity to participate in the county’s economic vitality and ensures that immigrants can access county benefits and services – knowing that the information they share will not be disclosed to federal immigration officials. In so doing, the trust policy establishes countywide standards for information sharing, among other protections.

A second guest speaker, Angela Aldave, Director of Community Relations for Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS), told the audience roughly 20 percent of the 183,000 students in FCPS are immigrants, speaking Spanish, Korean, Vietnamese, Arabic, Chinese and Urdu, among 100 other languages. Ms. Aldave said one of the biggest challenges in working with immigrant students is the reluctance of their parents – due to fear – to come forward and tell school officials what their child needs. To address this, FCPS has a policy in place that mirrors the county’s trust policy.

Following the talks by Karol Escalante and Angela Aldave, dialogue participants had the opportunity to visit a resource fair in which representatives of some of the agencies and organizations serving immigrants set up tables to share information about what they do. Organizations that took part in the resource fair included:

- Catholic Charities
- Community Services Board (CSB)
- EEOC-WFO Outreach and Education
- ENDependence Center of Northern Virginia
- Fairfax County Health Department
- Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS)
- INOVA Saville Center
- Just Neighbors
- Mission Center, Annandale United Methodist Church
- NCS Coordinated Services Planning (CSP)
- Neighbor2Neighbor
- VIDA Senior Centers