

Social-service providers discuss ways to aid 'new Americans'

By Bob Makin

SAYREVILLE — More than 140 social service providers said they will continue to network and cooperate after meeting at the first-ever immigration conference of the United Way of Central Jersey on Friday.

“Building Relationships to Better Serve Immigrants: Overcoming Obstacles, Challenges and Barriers” at Middlesex County Fire Academy couldn’t have been better timed just days after President Barack Obama’s executive order allowed thousands of young undocumented aliens to remain in the country. The event also coincided with the Supreme Court’s decisions in regard to Arizona’s controversial immigration laws and the Affordable Health Care Act. Many of the conference’s participants said they expected universal health care to greatly improve the lives of many low-income immigrants.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Social-service providers can find ways to better serve the immigrant population by contacting the New Americans program at the United Way of Central Jersey www.uwcj.org.

The conference included a United Way-commissioned study on county immigration patterns, a panel discussion on immigrant needs, several workshops designed to foster partnerships between providers, and a keynote address by the Rev. Dr. DeForest “Buster” Soaries. The senior pastor of First Baptist Church of Lincoln Gardens in the Somerset section of Franklin Township and former Secretary of State for New Jersey told several compelling tales to punctuate his message: nonprofits need to work together to best serve a misunderstood immigrant population.

“I don’t see new Americans or immigrants as a problem,” Soaries said. “The most creative and courageous and passionate people I know are people who risked everything and left it all behind to make it into this country. Instead of seeing them as a problem, perhaps — with these children of ours who think that poverty is only having five television stations, these children of ours whose sense of entitlement has made them almost useless, with these children of ours who will kill each other over a pair of sneakers — we ought to see these new Americans as being a part of the solution to the American problem because we have a problem.

“In Eastern European countries and in India, the people are voting at a rate of 70 to 90 percent,” he added. “We need people who appreciate the rights of the democratic process to come here to teach us why it’s important to go out and vote. We need people to come into this country and teach about real values. Some of the poorest people on the planet, who press their way here, have some of the solutions to the most intractable problems we have in this country.”

Soaries was preceded by Dr. Anastasia Mann, director of Eagleton Institute of Politics’ Program on Immigration and Democracy, who presented her study, “Crossroads of the World: New Americans in Middlesex County, New Jersey.” Mann said that while immigration has slowed in New Jersey compared to other parts of the nation, the two fastest-growing populations are Asian Indians and Hispanics. The low-income component of the latter has had trouble dealing with language issues and education, she said.

In the panel discussion, Bruce Rothenberg, just-retired principal of North Brunswick’s Parsons Elementary School, explained how he dealt with a lack of education among low-income Hispanic families.

“We were finding that children coming into kindergarten had not gone to preschool, so they were weeks behind,” Rothenberg said. “Their parents told us, ‘We thought that was your job. We’re working to provide for our families.’ So we created a kindergarten orientation that meets in the summer.”

Fellow panelist David Jefferson Harris, co-founding executive director of the 43-year-old Greater New Brunswick Day Care Council, agreed that more preschool opportunities are needed for low-income immigrant families. The population of his program, which serves 140 children, has changed from 98 percent black to 98 percent Hispanic since its formation, Harris said.

Moderated by Steve Jobin, CEO of Raritan Bay YMCA in Perth Amboy, the panel discussion also focused on the exploitation of immigrant temporary workers by Walmart and Target. Marien Casillas-Pabelon of the New Brunswick-based New Labor organization said she is pursuing more government policing of the situation.

The conference also offered four workshops on naturalization, legal services, education, English as a second language, health, access and outreach.

Organizer Jag Vasudev, director of United Way of Central Jersey’s New Americans Program, said he was confident participating social services providers would take what they learned from the conference and apply it to provide better, more efficient services.