

Tapping into immigrant volunteers

For one local organization, welcoming immigrants and refugees as volunteers is a win-win situation.

For over 20 years, the Candora Society has been focused on helping low-income residents in the northeast area of Edmonton, specifically the Abbottsfield and Rundle communities where 75 to 80 per cent of residents live below the poverty line.

Candora offers a number of diverse programs and services such as infant care classes, a nutrition program for pregnant women, a multicultural women's group, computer and English classes, an employment prepara-

tion course and more.

Debbie Clark, executive director of Candora, believes the high concentration of low-income housing and close proximity to major

roadways are some of the reasons why immigrants and refugees choose to settle in the area.

It's no wonder the organization attracts many of the same community members as volunteers.

"Because this area has been diverse for so many years, it's easy for immigrants to build communities here," Clark says. Recently, Candora has developed a unique role

within the organization that is representative of the people that live in the community and that helps create an inclusive and welcoming environment for all volunteers - a multicultural

volunteer co-ordinator position.

This makes people feel comfortable regardless of who they are. "Calling it multicultural signifies the work that we do," she says.

Paula Brito, a recent immigrant from Portugal, remembers her first encounter at Candora and how it led her to volunteer with the organization.

'I FEEL COMFORTABLE HERE'

"I come here and everyone is friendly and smiling. I like this. I feel comfortable here," she says.

Brito appreciates the opportunity to build real-world skills while volunteering.

"We have volunteers attend some of our classes so they can develop employable skills so that when they do come to volunteer with us, they'll have some knowledge about what to do," Clark says.

She emphasizes that the organization is not a "training centre" or a school.

Unlike many other non-profits, Candora allows people to volunteer on a drop-in basis.

Providing that level of flexibility is important, especially for many immigrants who work long hours and can't commit to a set schedule.

"It works well because there's always something to do here. We're fortunate in that we have a lot of different tasks that need to be done," Clark says.

Brito is happy to help whenever, with whatever. "There are many things Candora offers to us, but I enjoy the work. I like meeting other people from different countries and helping," she says. "There are many people like me who didn't know many people, but I get to meet a lot of other people through volunteering. I learn about life here."

KEEP IT SIMPLE

For other organizations interested in learning how to engage and welcome immigrants and refugees as volunteers, Clark advises to keep things simple and to understand the demographic in each individual community.

"Really pay attention to the community and who those people are, and don't worry too much about a real formal intake process - that will intimidate most people," she cautions.

"Keep your paperwork simple and easy to understand, and continue the conversation with your volunteers. Visit with them and make sure you ask them what they need so they can continue to support your agency."

To learn more about the programs and services, or how you can help the Candora Society, call 780-474-5011 or visit www.candora.ca.

Next week, Volunteer Edmonton will examine how immigrants make an impact in our communities.

For information about volunteerism, visit www.volunteeredmonton.com or contact Evelyn Pham at 780-732-6655.

PART 5 OF 6



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