

Documented immigrants feeling uneasy

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By Peg Quann

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Agencies that help immigrants see that even those legally in the United States feel concern about Trump's immigration plans.

The climate in Washington, D.C., regarding immigration has left many immigrants feeling uneasy about their status in the United States, even if they have come here legally and have proper documentation, say those in Bucks County who are trying to help them.

President Donald Trump has tried to ban people from Muslim countries from entering the United States but so far the courts have stopped him. He plans to build a wall along the border of Mexico, increase the number of deportations and do away with sanctuary cities, which protect illegal immigrants, by withholding Department of Justice funds to those that don't follow the rules.

And, in the past month, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services announced that multiple measures will be used to detect visa fraud and abuse since foreign workers take jobs for which Americans who are "qualified, willing, and deserving to work in these fields have been ignored or unfairly disadvantaged.... Protecting American workers by combating fraud in our employment-based immigration programs is a priority for USCIS," the notice stated.

"I think this has had a tremendous impact on everyone in the country. Our students, staff and board are really concerned," said Linda Wolfson, executive director of Vita Education Services in Doylestown Borough, a nonprofit agency that helps immigrants and their families with language skills and other services.

Wolfson said, "There doesn't seem to be much distinction between the documented and non-documented (immigrants)," as both groups are reporting misunderstandings and, in some cases, "verbal abuse" in their dealings with other Americans. "People are afraid to go out," she said, and her agency has seen that those here legally are less willing to get Social Security numbers because "there is a real suspicion of the government."

Vita provides services to three types of immigrants, Wolfson said adults coming from other countries, those who came as children and those who were born here but raised in households with foreign-born parents and many cultural differences. An ESL class could have people coming from 12 different countries and 80 percent of them speaking a language other than English at home.

According to the American Community Survey of 2011-15, a project of the U.S. Census Bureau, an estimated 52,132 foreign-born residents were living in Bucks County in 2015 out of a total estimated population of 625,583. Approximately 82,732 foreign-born people lived in Montgomery County in 2015 out of a estimated population of 812,970.

Meg Eubank, the director of Welcoming the Stranger, a nonprofit that also offers English language classes in Bucks and Montgomery counties, said she too has seen immigrants who "don't feel welcome" but noted that many people in Bucks are trying to help them.

Retired teacher Lois Heist, who is leading free language sessions at St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church in Lower Makefield, said she doesn't like the undercurrent of talk she hears about immigrants.

"Even those who are here legally and fully documented are concerned," she said. "There's so much anti-immigrant rhetoric."

Russian immigrant Anna Ovechkina, who moved to Falls from her native Moscow two years ago when her husband was offered a technology job here, doesn't fear being forced to return to Russia.

But, she added, that getting established in the United States is difficult, even for highly educated immigrants. She has an advanced degree in accounting from Russia but no green card. So, she needs to start over to get certified here, and that involves going back to school and learning the language and taxation laws.

She said the Americans she meets every day have been friendly and welcoming, "but it's very hard to get a normal paying job."

Ovechkina meets every week with a group of other foreigners from several different countries at a shopping center where they sit in the food court and converse to improve their English skills.

Wolfson said that some Americans think that foreigners don't want to learn English and that undocumented immigrants are taking advantage of social services. But Vita sometimes has a waiting list for English classes and its staff hasn't seen anyone taking advantage of the welfare system. "These are very hard-working individuals who have left their country to pursue a better life," she said.

Refugees have often been traumatized in their home countries and are "very appreciative of being in the United States," she added.

Welcoming the Stranger recently joined One Bucks, an umbrella group that organized last fall when both immigrants and religious minorities were targeted with hate crimes.

One Bucks plans to offer education and outreach programs, as well as a system of reporting hate crimes to law enforcement so that someone who is concerned about discrimination has a place to turn for help, Eubank said.

"The community is banding together to say this is unacceptable," said Welcoming the Stranger's Eubank.

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