

League of Women Voters studies local immigration

18-month examination aims to help new citizens assimilate

BY WARREN BLUHM

wbluhm@greenbaypressgazette.com

As the debate churns on over the local impact of immigration, an 18-month study by the League of Women Voters of Greater Green Bay found a large community of professionals and volunteers quietly working to help newcomers assimilate.

Businesses are hosting English classes on-site for their employees, schools and nonprofit organizations have ramped up their literacy classes, and human services agencies and private charities alike have worked to accommodate a growing number of people who have come to Brown County in search of jobs and a better life for their families.

"The community is just silently going on and dealing with the reality that exists," said Helen Schwartz, who chaired the study. "Then when people come out and have these big battles at the City Council, you wonder: They obviously don't know how things are going."

Schwartz and six members of the study group recently met with the editorial board of the Green Bay Press-Gazette to detail the local study's role in a nationwide League effort to find a consensus on the multifaceted immigration discussion.

League chapters across the country have been asked to undertake local studies of the impact of immigration in their communities, Schwartz said. The national group's position calls for immigration policies that promote reunification of immediate



Shoua Xiong Lee, center, receives a mock voter's slip from Lea Schameil as part of a voters' drive sponsored by the League of Women Voters of Greater Green Bay held at Fort Howard Elementary School. The League recently completed an 18-month study on the local impacts of immigration. **File/Press-Gazette**



LEAGUE OF
WOMEN VOTERS®



Schwartz



Arneth



Hinckley

The committee that worked on the League of Women Voters of Greater Green Bay immigration study included Helen Schwartz, chairwoman, who also worked on business impacts; Julie Arneth, education; Pat Hinckley, elected officials and advocates; Anne Smith, history of immigration; Linda Doro and Analesse Waggoner, human services. Committee members not pictured include Sue Whittemore, Ellen Olson and Dottie Juengst.



Smith



Doro



Waggoner

League of Women Voters of the United States position on immigration

"The League of Women Voters believes that immigration policies should promote reunification of immediate families; meet the economic, business and employment needs of the United States; and be responsive to those facing political persecution or humanitarian crises. Provision should also be made for qualified persons to enter the U.S. on student visas. All persons should receive fair treatment under the law."

To read the full position, visit www.lwv.org, click on "Projects" and then select "Immigration Study."

families, meet the needs of businesses and are "responsive to people who face political persecution or humanitarian crises."

The reality in Green Bay is more cooperative than government officials and media reports might lead someone to believe, said committee member Analiese Waggoner.

"Some of what's been in the news has been pretty embarrassing and not very conducive to attracting people to this community, either immigrants or the creative class that we're trying to get here," Waggoner said. "We wanted to tell another story, that there really is another Green Bay here that's

working hard to help this to be a good place for people to work and to come in and live and raise their families."

As the local chapter's study was being completed last summer, a controversy broke out over the Green Bay City Council's decision to crack down on businesses that hire illegal immigrants. Waggoner said much of the public discussion was "polarizing" — either from people concerned about the specter of undocumented workers in the community or immigrants concerned about discrimination.

"I think what we found

when we talked to the agencies, we talked to the businesses, were people in the community who were working really hard to bring these people into the community," Waggoner said. "We're not saying there aren't problems, that it's easy, but that people are really working in a proactive way — human services agencies, schools, even the businesses are supportive."

"A lot of comments were made — positive, negative, whatever — without a lot of factual basis, we felt, on the local community," added committee member Pat Hinckley. "We didn't hear direct information. Some things that were quoted were from very biased national studies or from areas that had, perhaps, different problems than we do, or different numbers of immigrants — and we wanted to see what the impact really was for us and what our officials, our social services, our education community, our business community were saying was the positive and negative impact, monetary or otherwise."

Business owners were confident the majority of their immigrant employees are here legally, Schwartz said. But when they received a "no-match" notice from the Social Security Administration, workers are terminated if they can't account for the discrepancy, she added.

"Like most of us, immigrants come here because they want a nice place for their families," Schwartz says. "Most are caring and

loving people interested in getting a good education for their children."

That education includes learning the language, according to the subcommittee that studied local educational efforts. In 2006, Green Bay schools reported having 3,051 studied in English Language Learner classes — 2,123 whose first language was Spanish, 795 Hmong, 35 Laotian, 40 Russian/Ukrainian and 58 who spoke 28 other languages.

Subcommittee member Julie Arneth, who teaches ELL students through Literacy Green Bay, says her adult students are working hard to become part of U.S. society.

"Part of the class is going to the library, getting a card, checking out materials — so they're definitely integrating into the community," Arneth said.

The vast majority of immigrants are as concerned as U.S.-born citizens about the influx of undocumented immigrants, said Hinckley, who interviewed law enforcement officials for the study.

Criminals who are here illegally "don't prey on the larger community," Hinckley said. "The victims are their own community — and oftentimes silent victims, because they're afraid to speak out."

Linda Doro encountered fearful victims while talking with people at the Golden House shelter for victims of domestic violence, especially women who are immigrants mar-

ried to U.S. citizens.

"He'll say, 'You can't tell on me because I can have you deported,' which is not true — but because they don't speak enough English, they're not sure," Doro said.

Waggoner cited the need to streamline the process of becoming a U.S. citizen.

"People are waiting for years and years to become citizens — it's a ponderous process," she said.

Leaders in each of the study areas — business, education, human services, politics and law enforcement — cited the need for comprehensive reform, Schwartz said.

"You can't just take one leg of a stool and work at it," she said. "The truth of the matter is in Green Bay we need the immigrants in our work force."

The solution begins at the federal level, all agreed.

Law enforcement and municipal officials "can't solve their biggest problems unless the federal government takes a lead here. And they need to address all things. They all said they need to address the border, because we need to find a way to track the individuals that do come in," Hinckley said. "Then they all say we need to deal with the people who are already here — legal, illegal — if they haven't committed serious crimes, they have a job and they're working hard — there has to be a way for them to attain legal work permits or citizenship ultimately if that's what they want."

League of Women Voters' visions, beliefs and intentions

The goal of the League of Women Voters is to empower citizens to shape better communities worldwide.

The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan political membership organization which:

- acts after study and member agreement to achieve solutions in the public interest on key community issues at all government levels.
- builds citizen participation in the democratic process.
- engages communities in promoting positive solutions to public policy issues through education and advocacy.

The League of Women Voters Education Fund is a nonpartisan public policy educational organization which:

- builds citizen participation in the democratic process.
- studies key community issues at all governmental levels in an unbiased manner.
- enables people to seek positive solutions to public policy issues through education and conflict management.

We believe in:

- respect for individuals.
- the value of diversity.
- the empowerment of the grassroots, both within the League and in communities.

We will:

- act with trust, integrity and professionalism.
- operate in an open and effective manner to meet the needs of those we serve, both members and the public.
- take the initiative in seeking diversity in membership.
- acknowledge our heritage as we seek our path to the future.

Source: greatergreenbay.wi.lwvnet.org

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Findings of League's immigration study

Here are excerpts from the League of Women Voters of Greater Green Bay's study of immigration's impact on the local economy.

Business

In talking with business leaders, we have learned that the immigrants have made an important and needed impact in the economics of business in this city. In our interviews, we have talked with leaders in building and construction, banks, meat packing, business consulting, hotel/restaurant and small business ...

All the leaders we talked with in Green Bay emphasized the need for unskilled workers in order to continue their flourishing businesses. They told us if they cannot find workers for available jobs, the cost would fall upon the citizens in (the form of) higher prices for products.

At the same time, industry, medical, health and education are seeking high-skilled labor such as nurses, professional educators, engineers, mathematicians and individuals skilled in technology. Immigrants accepting such positions are given visas and are filling gaps in our work force. These immigrants are paid well ...

Human services agencies

... Not all the agencies contacted answered our request. In all we held interviews with 13 agencies covering a broad spectrum of services, including health care, food assistance, child care, youth services, counseling and housing ...

Often agencies have to step back and provide more rudimentary information and referral for immigrant clients. Basic life skills must be introduced, e.g., how to get a driver's license, how to apply for a job ...

Many agencies seek to reach out and be partners with agencies and groups that represent the immigrants, e.g., inviting representatives to be on their boards. Virtually all agencies have printed materials and forms translated into Spanish, and some have Hmong translations as well ...

Language is the primary issue. From that flows the person's ability to get a good-paying job, find good housing and ensure other basic needs are met. There are not enough opportunities for people to learn English offered at times when the immigrants can come. Some employers are offering English classes at the work site.

ELL initiatives

Since 1981 there has been an increase in the number of English Language Learners (ELL) in the Greater Green Bay Area due to the influx of immigrants and newcomers into our community. Because it takes two to three years of instruction to be conversationally proficient in English and seven to 10 years to be academically proficient, a significant amount of effort has been made to assimilate non-English speakers by the Green Bay Area Public Schools, Literacy Green Bay, Cooperative Educational Service Agency 7, Northeast Wisconsin Technical College and a myriad of other organizations, including churches and community centers. As a result of this commitment to educate ELL students, these instructional facilities have greatly increased services.