

Conference will focus on immigrants' skills

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Waterloo Region is waking up to the fact it is squandering a rich source of job skills offered by hundreds of highly educated immigrants.

And that's one of the key reasons regional community leaders are supporting an immigrant-skills conference this spring, said Rich Janzen, research director with Kitchener's downtown Centre for Research and Education in Human Services.

About 30 local groups are helping to organize the conference, which will be co-ordinated by the centre, a non-profit social research organization.

The event will further educate people about federal research studies that estimate Canada wastes as much as \$5 billion a year by under-utilizing the job skills of incoming immigrants.

National studies show six of 10 new Canadians often live in poverty because they end up in an employment field that has nothing to do with their educational and job skills.

A regional survey done by the centre noted 22 per cent of Waterloo Region's population is foreign-born and, by 2011, Canada's entire labour-force growth will come from immigration.

The study scrutinized standards established by 38 Ontario professional regulatory groups.

Janzen said a top conference objective will be to form a local Immigrant Employment Council that focuses on integrating under- utilized immigrant skills into the job market.

The council would then nurture regional efforts that are already taking place to establish what's known as a career bridge to provide paid internships for immigrants at local businesses.

The bridge concept -- which exists in Toronto -- will include a mentoring program to support skilled immigrants once they find work, Janzen said.

Council members will include immigrants, politicians, civil servants and executives from local industries.

Janzen said a good indication that the immigrant issue is gaining political and community momentum is reflected in the number of sponsors willing to pay up to \$10,000 to participate and help the conference.

To date, sponsors include the United Way, K-W Community Foundation, Kitchener-Waterloo Chamber of Commerce, Waterloo Region, the City of Kitchener, the University of Waterloo, the Waterloo- Wellington Training and Adjustment Board, Canada's Technical Triangle and Communitech.

"Many more people are becoming aware businesses need skilled immigrants to meet increasing labour shortages," Janzen said. "They know the problem will get worse in coming years . . . and they're trying to be proactive instead of reactive."

He said the ongoing issue of foreign-trained doctors forced to drive cabs or take other survival jobs because their training is not recognized in Canada has been widely discussed in the media and become part of the daily language used by politicians.

"In the past six months . . . we have seen many more politicians and others scurrying to find ways to solve the complex issue . . . that involves four levels of government," Janzen said.

He said he's optimistic efforts will continue to show how Ontario's regulated professions can be made more accessible to immigrant professionals.

Keynote speaker at the April 28 conference will be Mary Anne Chambers, Ontario minister of training, colleges and universities.

The event will take place in the Lutherwood great hall at 139 Father David Bauer Dr., Waterloo.

Additional information can be obtained by calling the research centre at 741-1318 or at www.crehs.on.ca

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