

Skills go to waste

Zehr wants end to bias against foreign-trained

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Racism and discrimination that prevent foreign-trained professionals from finding local jobs should be eliminated by government and regulatory bodies, Kitchener Mayor Carl Zehr said yesterday.

Zehr was one of five politicians speaking at a forum organized to spotlight a survey showing how the skills of highly educated, foreign-trained immigrants are going to waste.

About 150 people attended the forum at Kitchener's Polish Legion, held to promote a one-year survey of about 200 highly trained immigrants living in Waterloo Region.

The forum was also held to demand action from politicians as well as professional and trade regulatory bodies.

Zehr said systematic discrimination and racism are apparent when legitimate immigrant qualifications are not recognized.

QUESTIONS MOTIVE

"Whether it's immigrant doctors or other professionals . . . regulatory bodies who refuse to recognize qualifications . . . have to examine their actions and decide if they are correct or just being used to protect existing members," Zehr said.

Waterloo Mayor Lynne Woolstencroft and mayor-elect Herb Epp agreed more work has to be done by regulatory bodies to solve the issue.

Kitchener Centre MP Karen Redman and MPP John Milloy joined Waterloo MPP Elizabeth Witmer in pledging to work with immigrants and regulatory bodies.

Like others attending the forum, politicians were asked to sign a call for action based on the survey prepared by the Centre for Research and Education in Human Services, a non-profit social research organization in Kitchener.

Report authors noted that more than 22 per cent of Waterloo Region's population is foreign born and that, by 2011, all the growth in Canada's labour force is expected to come from immigration.

The authors of the \$100,000 survey financed by Heritage Canada examined experiences of men and women between the ages of 25 and 54 living in Waterloo Region who were told, before leaving their home countries, that their job skills matched those required in Canada.

Sixty-eight per cent are now unemployed and many work part time in Waterloo Region, one of the most popular destinations in Canada for highly skilled immigrants.

Among those employed, the survey found that 45 per cent have jobs unrelated to their education or professions.

At the forum, Esmaeil Zoghi, a chemical engineer who came to Canada from Iran, and Neera Mehta, an accountant who came from Kenya, explained employment difficulties they faced in in the region.

Zoghi, 52, had 25 years experience in his profession when he came to Canada with his wife and two children.

Before leaving Iran, he said, Canadian officials approved his qualifications and told him his skills were needed here. Now, he can't get work because employers question his credentials and say he has no Canadian experience.

"I have even offered to work for no money for three months to show what I can do . . . but no one is interested," Zoghi said.

Neera Mehta, an employment counsellor at the Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre, said she quickly realized her qualifications as an accountant were not recognized in Canada after she came here from Kenya.

Mehta, who now works with 146 foreign-trained doctors who live in Waterloo Region but can't find work, said she was insulted when told she had to take Grade 12 math and English.

"Before we came, they said 'We need you . . . you will have no problem getting work . . . there are plenty of jobs,' Mehta said. "Our hopes were high but, oh, boy, what a shock when we arrived."

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