

The Record (Waterloo Region)
Local, Friday, April 29, 2005, p. B1

Attracting immigrants vital; Waterloo conference tells region to sell itself better to skilled people

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WATERLOO - Waterloo Region has to launch a brain-gain campaign to attract qualified new Canadians and end systematic discrimination that prevents them from finding jobs once they arrive.

Those were two of dozens of proposals discussed yesterday at a Waterloo conference on immigrant skills.

Participants were told Waterloo Region is rapidly losing ground to other communities and has to do more to sell itself as a quality destination for newcomers.

More than 200 people attended the conference at Lutherwood Great Hall, where the keynote speaker was Mary Anne Chambers, Ontario minister of training, colleges and universities.

Chambers, who urged employers to work harder to hire skilled newcomers, emphasized a need to give comprehensive employment information to potential immigrants when they apply for visas in their home countries.

And she asked conference participants to consider the inequity in a situation where the federal government provides a \$3,800 settlement allowance for any immigrant arriving in Quebec but only \$800 to one settling in Ontario.

About 30 immigrant, community, business, labour and education groups organized the conference, which was co-ordinated by Kitchener's Centre for Research and Education in Human Services, a non-profit social-research body.

Participants debated the findings of five task forces that investigated the issues in preparation for the conference.

One task force, for example, showed how employers can create a more welcoming environment for immigrants, and another examined how their qualifications could be better recognized.

Waterloo Region has to do more to sell itself and inform prospective immigrants about the area's booming economy and employment market, the conference heard.

One task force said an information program should be launched to educate local residents about the skills and qualifications that immigrant professionals and tradespeople bring to the community.

The 17 local participants on a task force that examined immigrant support systems said negative attitudes, stereotypes and myths about newcomers exist in Waterloo Region.

"These attitudes influence immigrant lives in many ways, from subtle acts to overt discrimination," the report said. The authors said an education campaign would challenge negative perceptions, increase understanding of skills immigrants have and "decrease the notion they require charity."

Mirna Carranza of K-W Counselling and Gebre Berihum from Kitchener's Downtown Community Health Centre spoke on behalf of a 17-person task force that wrote a report on immigrant-support systems.

In interviews, they said one of the most difficult employment barriers faced by new Canadians has to do with hidden, systematic discrimination.

"This systematic discrimination makes many immigrants feel like second-class citizens (and) they want to be equals," Carranza said.

"You can give immigrants programs and information until you're blue in the face but, if employers won't hire them, you're wasting your time."

Berihum said immigrants often face hidden discrimination when employers refuse to hire because of colour, accents or English-language skills.

"You can't see that discrimination (but) sometimes, interviews are more like English tests and have little to do with job skills," he said.

Thom Ryan, marketing and investment officer for Canada's Technology Triangle, acted as spokesperson for 12 task force members who wrote another report on the need to attract and retain skilled immigrants in Waterloo Region.

He said the region should do more to promote itself and make certain incoming skilled immigrants have definite job opportunities instead of just support services .

In their report, task force members said this area was once a magnet for immigrants but has lost ground in the past decade.

"Unfortunately, Waterloo Region's positive attributes are not well known by immigrants before they move to Canada (and) the result is a significant missed opportunity," the report said.

It noted the region attracts many secondary immigrants -- newcomers who land in other provinces and move here after learning about support services, a healthy economy and educational opportunities.

Rich Janzen, research director with the Centre for Research and Education, said the next step after the conference is to organize a local immigrant employment council that focuses on integrating under-utilized immigrant skills into the job market.

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

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