

Immigrants' concerns to be spotlighted at new county center

Wheaton Facility named after Gilchrist, former county executive
by Jackie Mah

Immigrants and other minority residents of Montgomery county will soon have a new county facility, set to open in Wheaton on Tuesday, to cater to their issues and concerns.

The new Charles W. Gilchrist Center for Cultural Diversity, named after the late former county executive who left politics for the seminary and social work, will cater to the needs of immigrants at various steps in the lives, said project manager Alexandra Teaff.

Programs will range from basic citizenship and language classes to advice on starting a business to cultural and social events.

Teaff said the center will bolster, and not overlap, existing community efforts.

"There are a number of wonderful organizations that are doing amazing work, and what we have been doing is connecting with those community organizations because we don't want to duplicate services," Teaff said.

"As we go along, we will connect with even more. We can offer (the groups) a space to provide their programs."

County Hispanic affairs liaison Wanda Resto Torres said she hopes the center will make her job easier.

Almost half of the state's Hispanic population lives in Montgomery County, according to 2000 U.S. Census information.

Montgomery County also has the largest Latin immigrant population in the state, Resto Torres said.

"We're looking for people with different skill sets to help with translation, interpretation, information and referrals."

—Alexandra Teaff, project manager

"One of the major concerns is, are (people with limited English skills) really having access to the health and human services?" She said.

Simple tasks like registering to vote or getting a driver's license can be challenging for immigrants who don't know where to start, Resto Torres said.

"I'm hoping the new center will help people navigate the systems," she said.

The center will have its grand opening ceremony 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday at the facility on 11319 Elkin St.

County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D), who initially proposed the idea for the center in 1999, will be the master of ceremonies.

U.S. Senator Paul S. Sarbanes (D), County Councilman Blair G. Ewing (D-At large) and five other individuals representing ethnic groups will also speak at the ceremony.

Gilchrist's widow, Phoebe Gilchrist, is also expected to attend.

The ribbon-cutting will be followed by cultural dance and music presentations from several community groups and an open house.

Duncan said the idea to name the center after Gilchrist seemed like the natural thing to do.

When Gilchrist died in the summer of 1999, Duncan said many people suggested the county name the executive office building and various other buildings after him. "I was thinking, 'What's something that he would have liked to be named after?' And it was certainly not this building here," Duncan said, referring to the county office building.

"He was very involved in reaching out to all segments of our community when he was county executive," Duncan said. "It just seemed appropriate."

Duncan called the center a one-stop shop for immigrants and a cultural center for ethnic communities.

"It's an idea whose time came a long time ago, and it was about time Montgomery County did this," he said.

The center was originally slated to open in January but organizers pushed the date back to allow for more preparation, Teaff said.

Three foreign languages, Spanish, French, and Urdu, the official language of Pakistan, are spoken among the center's four-person staff, but volunteers with other language backgrounds are needed, Teaff said.

"We're looking for people with different skill sets to help with translation, interpretation, information, and referrals," she said.

Teaff said the center is an easily accessible resource for immigrants and other minorities with limited English skills.

"All they need to do is come through our front doors," she said.

The center will be open 9 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. Tuesday to Friday and noon to 5 p.m. on Saturday.

Once phone lines are connected, the center's number will be 240-777-4940. In the meantime, Teaff can be contacted at 301-529-9804.