

Serving the Silent: We Are Still a Nation of Immigrants

by Plummer Alston Jones, Jr.

Two important decisions regarding library services for immigrants in North Carolina were made concurrently during 1997. The State Library of North Carolina and the public library leadership decided not to fund the North Carolina Foreign Language Center (NCFLC), housed in the headquarters of the Cumberland Public Library and Information Center since 1976. The NCLA Literacy Committee, with spokespersons Pauletta Bracy and Steve Sumerford, presented to the NCLA Executive Board a position paper dated September 29, 1997, and entitled "Growing Immigrant Population in NC and the Implications for Our Libraries," which questioned the wisdom of dropping a statewide service that is needed now more than in 1976.

The NCFLC was funded by the U. S. Department of Education under Title I of the Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA), administered by the State Library of North Carolina. These federal funds were supplemented with local funds from Cumberland County, but ironically, the NCFLC never received funds from the North Carolina General Assembly. The LSCA has since been replaced with the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA).

The NCFLC provided onsite circulation to a large Asian population in Cumberland County as well as a centralized interlibrary loan circulation to libraries and other educational institutions throughout the state. A 1979 nationwide survey demonstrated that the NCFLC was the only public library providing foreign language materials on a statewide basis. That status continued through 1997, when the decision was made for the NCFLC to cease its statewide service.

The NCLA Literacy Committee cited several changes in demographics having dramatic impact on our libraries and specifically on their ability to serve a growing immigrant population. The Committee stated that in 1996, over one thousand refugees came to North Carolina from twenty-five different countries, with the majority settling in Guilford County. From 1990 to 1994, the number of Hispanic births increased 59%, from 2.5% to 4.1%. In Forsyth County alone, about 20% of all births in the county were to Hispanic women.

About half of the Hispanics in Forsyth County indicated in a recent survey that they could not speak English. Hispanic student population in the public schools of North Carolina increased 107%, from 8,530 in 1990, to 17,699 in 1994. Many rural towns have seen the most dramatic impact in the growth of the Hispanic population. Thirty percent of the residents of Siler City in rural Randolph County are Hispanic.

The NCLA Literacy Committee reminded us that, while undocumented immigrants receive significant media attention, the vast majority of immigrants enter the country legally (87% in 1990). Each year, according to *Business Week*, immigrants pay \$90 billion in taxes and receive only \$5 billion in welfare.

Immigrants have special information needs, including English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction and study materials in audio and video, study materials for citizenship tests, information related to immigration laws, and community information on health and human services, as well as traditional reading material in their respective foreign languages.

The NCLA Literacy Committee called for "a more systematic, strategic and comprehensive approach" and challenged the North Carolina Library Association, as the state's professional library association, "to lead this effort." Since a coordinated, concentrated effort at the state level has failed with the dissolution of the NCFLC, the solution must now be at the grassroots level. Targeting the growing Spanish-speaking population of North Carolina is an excellent strategy, one that takes into account the NCFLC statistic that in 1990/91 Spanish language materials ranked number one in statewide interlibrary loan circulation.

Are libraries willing to commit a portion of their acquisitions budget to the foreign languages, notably Spanish, spoken by the immigrant populations in their cities, towns, and rural areas? Perhaps libraries will consider the advice of Eleanor (Edwards) Ledbetter of the Cleveland Public Library system and Chair of the now-extinct American Library Association (ALA) Committee on Work with the Foreign Born (1918-1948). In the September 1928 issue of the *American Library Bulletin*, Ledbetter suggested that libraries should allocate a percentage of the book budget proportionate to the percentage of the population of each immigrant group in the community served.

If this fiscal strategy is adopted, it will go a long way toward making the public library truly democratic and responsive in meeting the reading and literacy needs of all North Carolinians, regardless of their places of birth. The finding of my Summer 1992 *North Carolina Libraries* article on the

NCFLC is still true today: "North Carolina immigrants as well as American immigrants in general have never been united and vocal in their demands for public services, including library service." We as librarians must take the lead because immigrants are the most silent population we serve.

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