

The Austin Public Library New Immigrants Project

The New Immigrant Centers at the Austin Public Library (APL) were first established in the year 2000 in three APL branch locations and are now present in seven APL libraries. They were partially funded by grants from the Texas State Library and Archives Commission, the Friends of the Austin Public Library, the Austin Public Library Foundation, the Rachael & Ben Vaughan Foundation, and the Texas Book Festival, and they provide a variety of services, outreach, and materials to the considerable new immigrant population in Austin “regardless of type of immigration status” (Austin Public Library).

According to 2010 Census Data, the city of Austin, Texas is 35.1% Hispanic, 19.5% foreign born, and 34% of the population speaks a language other than English at home (US Census Bureau). This data is corroborated by the APL New Immigrant Program’s webpage, though it displays data from the year 2000.

The services provided at the New Immigrant Centers are a combination of materials and programming. They each contain a Study Center, which is focused on helping new immigrants improve their English and prepare for citizenship. The centers offer Rosetta Stone (English), Oxford Picture Dictionary Interactive, Road to Citizenship, Global Writer, video and audio players, videos, audio, and books for learning about U.S. Culture and learning English, and information and brochures from other area non-profits that provide services to immigrants. Patrons also have access to immigration information that may be of use to them.

These study centers are supplemented by three educational programs that include ESL classes, free public computer classes, and a program called Talk Time, which is an informal conversation group for non-native English-speaking adults. It strives to provide “a safe and relaxed environment in the library for these individuals to practice English-speaking skills” (Austin Public Library).

The ESL classes are taught onsite by APL community partners, and the library also conducts library tours for ESL classes in other parts of the community upon request. The free public computer classes are offered in both Spanish and English. According to the APL website, “the majority of users come from Latin American countries, such as Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala, but there are also a large number of users from Vietnam and China” (Austin Public Library). Hopefully, the Austin Public Library will expand its multilingual services to include Vietnamese and Chinese as these immigrant groups continue to grow in their community.

APL has a multilingual collection which includes “books, videos, DVDs, CDs, and periodicals in approximately 40 languages,” though they cite only ten by name on their website: “Chinese, French, German, Hebrew, Korean, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Vietnamese” (Austin Public Library).

The APL New Immigrant Project’s website is available in both Spanish and English, and the quality of information provided in Spanish is of equal caliber to the English version. The website itself provides a plethora of helpful information, including how to apply for a driver’s license, passport, social security card, how to submit a tax return, and how to apply for a job. There are links with information to legal aid and social services, and resources for starting a business. There are also links to outside resources about immigration, citizenship, and international news.

The APL New Immigrant Centers create a hub of services in seven Austin public libraries that specifically targets the traditionally underserved population of recent immigrants. Though the vast majority come from Mexico and Central America, many of the materials and services provided at the centers can be of use to members of other groups as well.

The public library is not traditionally a welcoming place for new immigrants. They are often intimidated by its security personnel, the dominance of English and North American culture, and the requirement to present government issued identification. The existence of a service center specifically targeting this group can work to overcome these barriers to library use by increasing intellectual accessibility. Initially, new immigrants will be provided with information and services relevant to their recent arrival and subsequent integration into mainstream U.S. society, through language and computer classes, citizenship classes, legal assistance, and assistance searching for jobs or starting a business.

The fact that these new immigrant centers are located at the public library helps to define the library as a valuable information resource in the mind of new arrivals to the community who might not otherwise feel welcome in the library and might not use it.

The New Immigrant Centers at the Austin Public Library are primarily focused on the Spanish-speaking community, but their service model could be adapted to target other groups in a particular public library's service area, such as political refugees or recent immigrants from other countries and linguist groups. The important thing is for each library to know its community, conduct a community needs assessment that accounts for the diverse subgroups within the community, and then tailor services and programming specifically to them.

References:

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