

FACT SHEET

Conversation Circles: English Language Learning Groups

BACKGROUND

The latest census reveals a dramatic rise in the state's immigrant population. Seventeen percent of our workforce is now immigrants--up from roughly 9 percent in 1980. As of 2004, one in seven Massachusetts residents was born in another country. Approximately 23 percent come from Asia, but there has been a notable shift in the countries of origin of these immigrants. Now, almost half of all new immigrants come from Latin American and the Caribbean. Nearly 1 out of every 5 immigrants entering the state was from Brazil.

There are some 38 active library-based literacy programs in the Commonwealth which offer services for English Language learners. However, many libraries that have seen increases in immigrants are not set up to offer a fully functioning ESOL/literacy program. As a way to solve the challenge of responding to need for English language practice, some of these libraries (such as Brookline, Chelmsford and Weston) have begun to offer informal English Conversation programs. These programs may be supervised by library staff but conducted by trained volunteers. Volunteers are often eager to participate as a way to meet new people, learn about other cultures and become involved in the community. Many want to give back to society or participate because they may have prior experience through travel or friendships with those who grew up in a family where English was not the primary language.

Other states (for example, Washington and Connecticut) follow a model called "Talk Time," which was begun through collaboration with local social services agencies and with AmeriCorps volunteers. Some Massachusetts programs offer informal groups like "Let's Talk", "Small Talk" or simply, "Conversation Circles." Regardless of the name, these programs represent an important response from the library about the need to provide structured opportunities for second language learners in need of opportunities to practice basic conversational English. Sessions are designed to increase the participant's comfort level when using English and help increase participants' knowledge of American culture, customs, and idiomatic expressions. Programs would serve as a forum for community members to meet others from different cultures.

Programs would:

- Be volunteer led and coordinated by designated, trained library staff;
- Consist of 6 to 8 participants in each group conducted in an informal relaxed and friendly atmosphere in the library or community location;
- Be about one hour long and focus on vocabulary building through informal conversation;
- Focus on topics of practical interest such as ordering food, going to the doctor, or visiting a child's school.

MASSACHUSETTS LONG RANGE PLAN GOAL

Goal 5: All Massachusetts residents will have equal access to library information, collections, and services regardless of their geographic location, cultural or socioeconomic background, and regardless of disability or limited functional literacy skills.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

This program would allow libraries to receive grants of up to \$12,500 to develop a volunteer program for Conversation Circles. Funds would be used to pay for a part-time volunteer coordinator and pay for support materials on English language instruction and citizenship. The library should work with local agencies serving newcomers as well as organizations that place trained volunteers in community service positions. Libraries would need to commit staff time to organizing and training volunteers and agree to designate at least one staff member as support for this program. This is a two year program.

ELIGIBILITY

Any public library that meets standard eligibility requirements for Direct Grant programs is eligible to apply.

Public Libraries must have identified a need to serve the language and learning needs of a diverse population in their long range plans.

Also awardees must participate in a training session to be offered by the MBLC in the fall after the award has been made.

INTERESTED?

Applicants must submit a **Letter of Intent** form with the “Conversation Circles” option check off under **TYPE**. If you need more information about this program call, Shelley Quezada at the MBLC 1 800-952-7404 ext. 235 or email shelley.quezada@state.ma.us.