

Friendly social service planning sought

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Already, Lai is encouraged to get calls from parents and students who approach on their own.

"They feel that they can trust me and they want to talk to me," she said.

But the three-day-a-week placement is temporary, and only funded until June. EMYS has applied for a second year of funding from the United Way, Lai said, while it looks for private donors in the Chinese community.

Markham is also home to most (16,035) of the region's South Asian population, estimated at 27,695 people in 1996. But South Asian agencies doing settlement services in the region are still few and far between, said Jan Sharma, vice-president of Women of India in Canada (AWIC).

The North York-based group teaches immigrants, in their own languages, skills like how to get a Canadian social insurance number or how to find a job.

A Markham resident, Sharma said AWIC finds people unaware of what they should be told when they enter Canada.

"Unfortunately, a lot of people get lost in the shuffle," she said.

In a recent planning forum for the region, a lot of people said services have to be friendly and accessible to the "new ethnicities" and staff should be culturally sensitive and respectful, social services commissioner Joann Simmons said last month.

"They are as much entitled to these services as anyone else is," she added.

But Simmons said the local business community has to get involved in things like program planning and sponsorship.

Last week, John Waller, the region's long term planning director, said getting the right services can be confusing for anyone.

Regional council ordered staff this month to prepare a human services plan to get volunteer agencies, hospitals, schools and other providers of service better coordinated, and, hopefully, more efficient in their delivery.

Religious groups are also trying to keep up with York Region's suburban growth. Markham is now home to more than 10,000 Muslims, most of them immigrants from the Middle East, Pakistan and India, according to the Islamic Society of Markham.

The society has a small prayer centre in a rented house in town but lots of local Muslims still go to daily prayers in Scarborough mosques, Abdur Ladha, a member of the society council said.

After three years of searching for a site, the society is raising funds for a Milliken-area mosque, billed as the first in Markham, and construction should start in 1999, Ladha said.

"Our target is to finish it within one year."

Romberg said Thornhill already has a myriad of Jewish services but many others are looking to relocate to York or build branch operations north of Steeles Avenue.

Romberg, a Thornhill resident, said the federation is looking hard along Bathurst for land that can serve as a campus for two or three key Jewish organizations.

Allison Lawrence, a social worker with the African and Caribbean communities for Catholic Community Services of York Region, encourages outdoor activities for newcomers who don't know what to do with children in winter, telling them, "It's okay for the kids to play in the snow."

Lawrence tries to show her clients how to tap into community centres and how to understand an education system that encourages children to speak up. Caribbean parents might think "the kids are being trained to be disrespectful," she said.

Last month, Markham Regional Councillor Tony Wong held a crime prevention forum in Pacific Mall, trying to get residents of multicultural Milliken to participate in the area's slowly-waning Neighbourhood Watch and in new anti-crime programs for local schools.

No one showed up, although a few strolling shoppers seemed interested. Wong was reminded of the opinion of Leyland Gudge, a Milliken social worker, that a North American "institutional" approach to crime prevention cannot work in Milliken and there must be an informal yet "traditional" way to get people involved.

But Wong said since Milliken people come from many different backgrounds, no one approach would appeal to them all.

"So in the absence of any better package, we have to use the Canadian package," he said.

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