

Local News

CITIZENSHIP/New laws to affect local Russian immigrants

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land Park and other places where Jewish refugees live and the Kansas City, Kan., building where citizenship classes meet. JF&CS also provides classes twice weekly at the Jewish Community Campus. Donnelly College also sends a teacher to Santa Fe Towers twice a week.

The immigrants study English, civics and American history in preparation for a 10-question oral or a 20-question written citizenship test. 60 percent of the answers must be correct to pass. Prospective citizens can choose which test they take.

Some Jewish immigrants who came to Kansas City after the Iron Curtain parted in 1989 have already become U.S. citizens. Some are too old and/or sick to study and pass a citizenship test.

Technically, legal immigrants are the financial responsibility of earlier-arriving family members who sponsored their immigration applications. But those younger immigrants are usually struggling themselves. Some elderly immigrants don't have younger family members present. Community leaders say their needs will be met through charity.

For those who are able, though, the rush to citizenship is on.

Difficult conditions

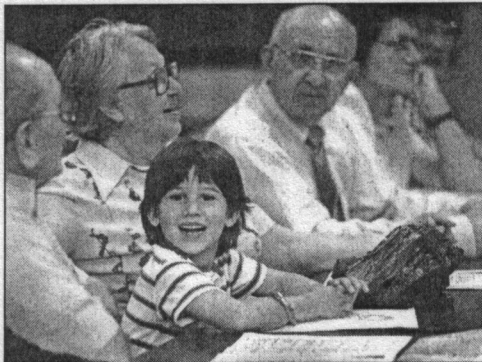
Fear is the big motivating factor. And many of the elderly immigrants are confused about the impact of welfare reform.

"Money, for us, is SSI," said Tatyana Krasnopolskaya. "If we don't become citizens, we don't receive money from SSI."

"We have a lot of people, very old," said Alysa Zapylayeva. "They cannot speak English. They cannot learn. They very old and sick. What will they do if they don't have SSI? They die."

"We no culprit," said Malvina Lantsberg, looking in her Russian/English dictionary for the right words. "Why do they (the government) say 'No SSI?'" she asked.

The answer: the lion's share of the monetary savings to be realized as the result of welfare reform comes from cutting off benefits to legal immigrants.



Kevin Blayney

Nelly Kyuglyak is 5 years old. She is the youngest Russian in Cyrus Shadfar's English class at Santa Fe Towers.

So Malvina Lantsberg is one of about 40 Russian immigrants who ride the bus back and forth most weekdays between their Johnson County residences and the Central Language Center, a satellite center of the Kansas City Kansas Community College. The center is a single room where four or five citizenship preparation classes are taught at once.

Each level is taught by a different teacher. Different classes are separated only by file cabinets and bookshelves. There are about 80 students in attendance at any given time. Most are Russian, but some are Hispanic and others are Asian.

At the center, students learn everything from how to write their name to who invented the cotton gin. Teachers hope the students will learn what they need to pass the citizenship test, as well as gaining the skills they need to get by in America.

"Very good teachers," said Krasnopolskaya. "But the room; it is impossible to study."

Voices from other classes disturb students in another. Everyone finds it hard to concentrate.

"It is chicken home," said Levin.

Still, the elderly students hang in there until noon, when they climb back on board the bus to go home. There is no air conditioning. No one has eaten lunch. The bus fills with chatter and a few people fall asleep.

The refugees say all the worrying, studying and traveling is taking its toll.

"Old people have depression," said Levin. "Is not

Half a loaf

The details of "welfare reform" were still being worked out this week at the federal level, as representatives of Congress and the president negotiated a budget agreement.

Under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, legal immigrants were to become ineligible for federal Medicaid, food stamps and SSI payments after five years of residency in the United States. States were given a certain amount of latitude in determining what sort of replacement benefits legal immigrants might continue to receive.

Due to actions taken by governors and legislators in Kansas and Missouri, poor and elderly legal immigrants will still be eligible for Medicaid.

There is also a possibility that the states will provide food assistance.

In Kansas, if SSI payments are not restored, those who qualify as disabled will be eligible to receive general relief payments equal to about 40 percent of their current SSI checks. Missouri may make similar, but smaller, payments.

That is hardly enough to live on.

So the executive committee of the Jewish Federation has decided to take action. Along with help in obtaining citizenship, Jewish refugees in need may receive aid from the Federation's "Refugee Supplemental Assistance Program."

Because the details of welfare reform have been unknown, it is uncertain just how much money will need to be raised for this project over the next year. But most of the money is expected to come from the Federation's Annual Giving Campaign, plus grants from the Jewish Heritage Foundation, the Jewish Community Foundation and private foundations.

"We're providing the safety net," said A. Robert Gast, executive director of the Jewish Federation of Kansas City.

good on health."

Anna Kapitannikova said it is difficult for her to learn a new language at her age. "Study, study, study," she said. "I go to bed. I get up. My head empty."

"Maybe for young is not so difficult," said Krasnopolskaya. "But for old people, is very difficult."

SHALOM/Sale off

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complete the sale by the end of 1996. But there were delays and changes before the deal finally fell apart.

First, the sale contract was extended twice. Then New Health dropped Heritage Housing from the deal and replaced it with D&H Healthcare of Missouri Inc., a new corporate entity, as buyer.

Then New Health's problems at The Phoenix came to light.

"As soon as it came forward, we got the reports from the state of Kansas — which are public records — and we were disturbed by those reports," Klein said. "New Health and the people there had a good reputation ... When we did our due diligence, they came through with good reports and everything. But what bothered me was that, while everyone makes mistakes, The Phoenix was not well managed and the problems there were not corrected over a fairly long period of time."

Klein said that, because Shalom is the party calling off the sale, it is negotiating a payment to New Health to compensate it for its effort on the deal.

Shalom loses more than a year's worth of effort it put into the deal. Its officials and lay leaders will continue to operate the Holmes Road facilities and will thus be unable to concentrate completely on its plans for Johnson County, Klein said.

Still, Klein is excited about Shalom's future. "Johnson County is still going forward," he said. "And what we're going to be doing is just incredible."

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