

## IMMIGRATION

# Demand outstrips English language programs

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MOUNT VERNON, N.Y. — Two weeks after she moved here from her native Brazil, Maria de Oliveira signed up for free English classes at a squat storefront in this working-class suburb, figuring that with an associate's degree and three years as an administrative assistant, she could find a good job in America so long as she spoke the language.

The woman who runs the classes at Mount Vernon's Workforce and Career Preparation Center added Oliveira's name to her pink binder, at the bottom of a 90-person waiting list that stretched across seven pages. That was in October. Oliveira, 26, finally got a seat in the five-morning-a-week class Jan. 16.

"I keep wondering how much more I'd know if I hadn't had to wait so long," she said in Portuguese.

As immigrants increasingly settle away from large urban centers — 225,000 have landed in New York's suburbs since

2000, compared to 44,000 in the city — many are waiting months or even years to get into government-financed English classes, which are often overcrowded and lack textbooks.

The National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials last year conducted a survey in which, in the 12 states that responded, 60 percent of the free English programs had waiting lists, ranging from a few months in Colorado and Nevada to as long as two years in New Mexico and Massachusetts, where the statewide list has about 16,000 names.

The U.S. Department of Education counted 1.2 million adults enrolled in public English programs in 2005 — about one in 10 of the 10.3 million foreign-born residents 16 and older who speak English "less than very well," or not at all, according to census figures from the same year. Federal money for such classes is matched at varying rates from state to state, leaving an

uneven patchwork of programs that advocates say nowhere meets the need.

## WAITING LISTS

"We have a lot of folks who need these services and who go unserved," said Claudia Merkel-Keller of the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development, noting that her state has waiting lists in every county — "from beginner all the way through proficient level."

Luis Sanchez, 47, a Peruvian truck driver for a beer distributor in New Brunswick, N.J., has been in this country 10 years — and on the waiting list for English classes in Perth Amboy five months. "You live from day to day, waiting to get the call that you can come to class," Sanchez said in Spanish, explaining that he knew a little English but wanted to improve his writing skills so he could apply for better jobs. "I keep on waiting."

Sanchez is unlikely to get the call soon: Perth Amboy's Adult Education Center

recently discovered that it was operating in the red and cancelled nine of its 11 evening ESL classes, including all at beginner and intermediate levels. In Orange County, N.Y., where the immigrant population doubled in the past 16 years, the Board of Cooperative Education Services' adult education program has stopped advertising for fear its overflowing beginner classes would be overwhelmed.

In Framingham, Mass., 20 miles west of Boston, hundreds of people used to spend the night in line to register for English as a Second Language, so the program now selects students by picking names from a big plastic box.

"With the lottery, everyone has the same chance," said Christine Taylor Tibor, director of Framingham's Adult ESL Plus program.

Census figures show that in the United States there were 32.6 million foreign-born residents 18 years or older in 2005, up about 18 percent from the 27.5 million counted in 2000

(and nearly twice the 17.1 million in 1990). Federal spending on adult education, about \$580 million last year, has increased 23 percent since 2000 and more than tripled since 1990; some 45 percent of the money is devoted to English.

## FINANCING

But financing varies widely across the states, which are required to allocate at least one quarter of what was provided by the federal government: Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Dakota and Texas spent the minimum in 2003, according to the education department, while California and Connecticut each spent about seven times that.

In New York, the state Education Department added \$76 million to the federal government's \$43 million for fiscal 2005. That year, according to a recent report by the Manhattan-based Center for an Urban Future, a nonprofit research group, there were about 86,500 people enrolled in government-sponsored adult ESL

programs, serving about 5 percent of the state's 1.6 million adults with limited English skills.

Last fall, Arizona voters approved an initiative banning illegal immigrants from benefiting from all state-financed programs, including English instruction; administrators of ESL classes in several other states said they do not check for documentation when registering students and thus did not know how many of them may be in the country illegally.

Advocates for more English classes say the state-federal financing split leaves an adult education system whose quality and reach varies widely from place to place — and is lacking most everywhere. Sen. Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, where the immigrant population has tripled since 1990, largely because of an influx of Mexicans, sponsored a bill last year that would have given legal immigrants \$500 vouchers to pay for English classes since so many of the free ones were full.