

Howard County Library System (HCLS) requests a \$100,000 Planning Grant to develop contextualized English language classes that support career pathways and improve English language proficiency at the workplace and in academic settings for skilled immigrants. The goal of this project is to pilot the development of a model for library systems that answers the primary questions, *How can a library enhance and support workforce development needs of a growing skilled immigrant population? What strategies can address barriers that are preventing many immigrants from advancing out of low-wage jobs?*

HCLS Project Literacy, the Library's adult basic education initiative, has 32 years experience teaching English as a Second Language, math, civics, citizenship, high school diploma preparation, workforce development, and workplace education to more than 10,000 adult students from 43 different countries. This initiative has mainly served adults with no or low-literacy skills and/or learning disabilities engaging in low wage or entry-level jobs. HCLS Project Literacy has established itself as a trusted and valued place in the community that immigrants turn to for English language instruction, support, and success in their desire to enter the workforce – 67% of students indicated a goal of getting a better job in the U.S. on a recent class survey.

The Manager of Project Literacy is a member of the Maryland Skilled Immigrant Task Force (MD SITF). This project is informed by that task force's work and will identify how to scale Project Literacy to enhance the workforce development needs of a growing population of skilled immigrants (those with college degrees or trade training), and pilot programming to develop industry-specific English language skills, earn family sustaining wages, and meet employer demand. Howard County is an ideal place to pilot such a project, with a 21% foreign-born population.

This effort directly aligns with IMLS' goal of promoting libraries as centers for lifelong learning for families and individuals of diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as improving the wellbeing of community residents. This project also adds to the realm of work that libraries are doing to more effectively serve new Americans, as evidenced through the ALA's New Americans Library Project.

**Statement of National Need:** Libraries are an important entry point to community services for new Americans, and an opportunity to fulfill their career goals is a high priority for this growing population. Underemployment or unemployment of immigrants who are looking for employment opportunities that align with their professional backgrounds and training has a detrimental effect on employers, communities and immigrants themselves (MD SITF). In Maryland alone, the task force reports that 20% of the college-educated foreign-born population is underemployed or unemployed. Immigrants comprise 18% of the state's population, so this represents a significant waste of human capital. Pew Research Center studies and US Census data paint this picture of immigrants today:

- account for 13.6% of the U.S. population, nearly triple the share (4.7%) in 1970.
- projected to drive future growth (adding 18 million) in the U.S. working-age population through at least 2035.
- 31% have college degrees or higher, (35% in Howard County), yet hourly wages are 12% lower.

**National Impact:** Urban Institute's 2018 research report, "Upskilling the Immigrant Workforce to Meet Employer Demand for Skilled Workers" identified limited English proficiency as a significant barrier to education, training and better jobs for immigrant workers. MD SITF has also concluded that lacking English language proficiency and career pathway opportunities are barriers to employment for skilled immigrants. This project will seek to inform libraries nationwide on how they can strengthen their roles, be responsive to shifting needs of new Americans, and identify classes, staff competencies, services, and partnerships to overcome key barriers to the integration of skilled immigrants into the workforce. This project will build the human capital and economic advancement of immigrants, boosting economic growth.

**Project Design:** The first six months of the grant period, beginning September 1, 2020 will be devoted to planning, leveraging community resources, and understanding the characteristics of the immigrant workforce

including their education attainment, occupations, wages, English proficiency, and employment needs. A part-time Project Coordinator, curriculum writer, and an Outreach Coordinator will form the project team who will work with a network of organizations including Howard County's Office of Workforce Development, Howard Community College's English Language Center, Howard County Government, Maryland Department of Labor, Maryland Skilled Immigrant Task Force, Howard County Public Schools, and county refugee resettlement organizations such as the Foreign-Born Information and Referral Network (FIRN).

Project Literacy has an established link to the immigrant community, and word of mouth is a primary way people learn about the program. To address the needs of other library systems that may not have such long-term, or even any, immigrant program in place, HCLS will emphasize expanded outreach and collaboration efforts. The Outreach Coordinator will not only inform the target skilled immigrant audience about the project and the pilot classes to be offered, but also build best practices for collaboration and engagement with community organizations and stakeholders to gather data for the planning stage of the project. HCLS staff are trained to be responsive to needs that community members articulate using Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) methodology that engages directly with community groups based on their strengths, potentials, and aspirations.

The planning stage will include mapping the characteristics and language needs of skilled immigrants and explore job opportunities in the community that will match their education and career goals. This will identify career pathways, language skills and training required for these immigrants to gain work and compensation commensurate with their skills, education, and experiences. The work of the MD SITF and HCLS' own research has identified five potential classes for this project to pilot for 15-20 students starting in spring of 2021:

1. TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language): Prepare those interested in enrolling in a U.S. college to pass the language test.
2. Professional and Academic English: English language instruction for those studying in universities and/or working in the U.S.
3. Workforce Preparation and English Language Instruction: Customized and contextualized bridge programs to address career readiness and improve English language proficiency at the same time. Classes will include career explorations in specific career fields and soft skills needed for employment.
4. Vocational Digital Literacy: Basic and advanced computer skills for workforce services and tools, and technical training. This type of class might lend itself to being offered at workplaces.
5. Financial Education: Classes will address banking, managing debt, and establishing credit.

This project will consider intensive, one-on-one tutorial sessions and small class sizes for instruction, with some classes being held outside library branches to improve access. Project Literacy has experience with a flexible approach and specialized support such as transportation and childcare needs to accommodate immigrants already working one or two jobs.

Instructors will conduct periodic assessment of participants in the pilot classes, and share survey results and the immigrant characteristics mapping to employment opportunities using Project Outcome, the website-based tool that provides resources and tools to measure library programs effectiveness and reach. HCLS will also submit a project overview and summary of outcomes to ALA's New Americans Library Project. HCLS proposes to present an overview of the project in a webinar and at the 2021/2022 ALA conferences.

**Budget:** Salary cost is \$55,000 for a part-time Project Coordinator and Outreach Coordinator. Contracts cost \$42,000 for five tutors, a curriculum writer for five new classes, and an evaluator for a final report. Supplies cost \$3,000 for promotional materials on classes, webinar and conference presentation, plus meeting materials. HCLS in-Kind – Project Literacy Manager salary, curriculum graphic designer, and travel expenses to conferences. Space: 13 tutorial cubicles, an A/V and wi-fi equipped classroom, a dedicated office for intake/assessment, a resource room, and an administrative office.