

## **The Elder Program**

*Catholic Charities and Kentucky Refugee Ministries, Louisville, KY*

The Elder Program is a collaboration between Catholic Charities and Kentucky Refugee Ministries in Louisville, KY, providing a community support network for senior or elderly refugees, as well as activities such as English classes, art classes, mentoring, and field trips.

The Elder Program holds meetings every Tuesday and Thursday for two hours. On Tuesdays, all participants in the program receive ESL instruction; on Thursdays, additional ESL instruction is provided for the lower-level students, while citizenship classes are offered to those with higher levels of English. Currently, there are four levels of classes at the program, but staff realize the need may arise to develop more levels as the program grows.

The program also brings in community speakers once a month to discuss topics pertinent to older refugees; interpreters are provided when community speakers are present. Community speakers have included representatives from the Louisville Metro Police Department (Crimes Against Seniors Unit), immigration attorneys, registered nurses, home weatherization professionals, and paramedics, among others. Recognizing the need to help the elders understand the importance of managing their health, the Elder Program is beginning a partnership with an ambulance service to visit the program every other month. During that time, elders can have their blood pressure, blood glucose, and other health measures and indicators checked.

Other activities at the Elder Program include a monthly field trip, whether educational or purely recreational. Past field trips have included visits to the Louisville Zoo, Oxmoor Literacy Farm, the capital building in Frankfort, Louisville MegaCavern, and a branch of the YMCA. Elders also participate in art sessions with a retired art therapist, who works with the elders in different language groups. A recent initiative was the coordination of an art show conducted in 2009 in conjunction with a local library branch; this event was repeated in August 2010, and has been scheduled for August 2011 as well. The Elder Program also coordinates two potluck lunches each year, when most of the elders bring food to share with everyone. Program management notes that although issues around meat exist (since some participants do not eat beef, some do not eat pork, some do not eat any meat, etc.), participants are eager to share their culture with the others and are excited to try food from their classmates.

The Elder Program guarantees participant transportation, which is through the local bus system and through a contract with one of the YMCA branches. Program management notes that this is by far one of the most expensive elements of the program's budget, but the program has found that guaranteeing transportation is the only way to ensure the elders will be able to come: Most of the elders' families and friends would be unable to provide their transportation on a regular basis.

The program relies very heavily on dedicated volunteers. Most volunteers come to every class and help in the classroom, providing additional one-on-one tutoring. Observing that the volunteers have really invested in the elders, which has proven key to providing them with the best possible care, the Elder Program is actively developing its mentor project. This involves pairing an elder with a mentor (young or old) who works in-home with the elder on English language learning and citizenship preparation. Mentors also help to introduce the elder to different community activities and services, and provide

individualized one-on-one attention that may be missing from the elder's life. Most mentors meet with their elders once a week.

Elder Program staff members and volunteers have identified a variety of other challenges frequently encountered within their client population. Many participants have little or no English skills and have never had any formalized schooling. In addition, many elders appear to feel isolated and obliged to stay at home to take care of grandchildren. Living in a "youth culture," where age is not as valued as it may have been in their home countries, also comes as a shock to Elder Program participants. Elderly refugees also express stress about the citizenship process, worrying about the potential loss of Supplemental Security Income and Medicare benefits.

Potential mental health issues such as anxiety and depression are complemented by physical ailments. Issues include reluctance to seek medical care and a lack of awareness of the appropriate circumstances in which one should seek immediate care. They also have trouble handling insurance-related matters such as deductibles and bills.

The Elder Program hopes to combat these and other challenges through its programming, and finds that participants find participation enjoyable and fulfilling as well as informative.