



New funding allows Welcoming Center to offer more services to immigrants

August 25, 2014

BY JULIE SHAW Daily News Staff Writer

HARVINDER KAUR worked as a nurse in her home country of India. After she moved to Upper Darby with her husband, she hoped to work in the same field.

"I was very scared when I came here," Kaur, 35, said yesterday.

She didn't want to work in a store. "I thought if I do any other job [other than nursing], I would lose my skills," she said.

With the help of the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians, a Center City-based nonprofit economic-development organization, Kaur was able to get her certified-nursing-assistant license and land her first job here.

The Welcoming Center earlier this week announced that it will receive grants totaling \$692,000 from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the Barra Foundation, which will allow eligible immigrants to re-establish their professional careers by helping them secure industry credentials.

The center has already been helping immigrants who are legally in the U.S. obtain jobs. With the funding, it launched a new program - the Immigrant Professionals Career Pathways Program - that will allow it to expand its services.

"For 10 years, the Welcoming Center has been able to put people on step one and step two of the path," said Amanda Bergson-Shilcock, its director of outreach and program evaluation. "The new program is amazing because it's going to allow us to have a whole menu of services."

The center's local government contracts allow it to place job-seekers only one time, she said. The requirement is meant to ensure that more people can be helped.

With the new private funding, the center is now free to help immigrant job-seekers find their second job as they move up the career ladder, and can offer higher-level English classes. The center's existing state and federal funding require that English only be offered at an entry level.

The center will also be offering new classes, such as an introduction to the American health-care system.

The Washington, D.C.-based Migration Policy Institute estimates that about 35,000

college-educated immigrants in Pennsylvania are affected by "brain waste" - that is, they are in low-skilled jobs or are unemployed.

In 2010, Kaur, her husband and their then-almost-2-year-old daughter moved from the northwestern state of Punjab in India to Upper Darby to live with her parents-in-law. They arrived on family-based immigrant visas.

Her husband, Jaswinder Singh, 37, had worked for 10 years as a civil engineer in Dubai, but now works as a taxi driver in Philadelphia, Kaur said. He would like to find an engineering job, she said.

In 2011, when she was ready to work, she went to the Welcoming Center's Upper Darby office, where she met an employment specialist. The staffer suggested she attend school to get a Certified Nursing Assistant license.

After Kaur did so, she returned to the office. The employment specialist found a potential job for her and brought her to the Holy Family Home nursing home in Kingsessing to meet with the human-resources director and helped her fill out an application.

Kaur returned to the nursing home another time by herself for an interview, and then got the job.

About two days later, Kaur attended a training session she had previously signed up for at the center's Center City office on JFK Boulevard near 16th Street.

The session included tips on how to dress, speak and prepare for an interview. She found it useful even though she already got her job. "They said, 'No jeans, no skirt,'" Kaur said. Instead, they recommended wearing "nice dress pants and a collared shirt," she said, and "to be very confident when you talk."

The "soft-skills training" also teaches people about making eye contact and how to shake hands, Bergson-Shilcock said.

Kaur has since on her own studied for and received her license as a Registered Nurse, and works at Holy Family Home. The nursing home, run by the Catholic group the Little Sisters of the Poor, is "a very nice place, very calm, quiet, they pray every day," Kaur said.

Of her life these days, she said: "Now, I'm feeling very happy."