

# Resource center a help for immigrants

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Imagine you are a new immigrant trying to assimilate in your new home. You begin to make friends in the community, find work and put down roots.

But because your status in the United States is not yet permanent, you aren't able to get an American driver's license.

On Nantucket, the Nantucket Regional Transit Authority is operational for only part of the year. The rest of the time, the only options are cabs, getting rides from friends or walking.

If you need to get to a doctor's appointment or go to the grocery store and can't walk or afford the cab fare, your limited options may put you behind the wheel of a vehicle without a license.

"It's a nightmare to drive when you don't have your license," Regina Zinser said. Zinser is an immigrant from Brazil who knows many people unable to get their licenses here on the island they now call home.

Immigrants who don't have an American license and are pulled over for a minor traffic violation are put in the path of Immigration and Customs Enforcement and face deportation.

"I have many friends still in that situation. All of them want to be out of the shadows but they are so afraid, but they have a reason for that," Brazilian native Vanessa Rendeiro said.

Rendeiro and Zinser are both immigrants who now assist their peers in the community navigate how to get basic resources as well as ask immigration status questions from a lawyer through the newly-formed Immigrant Resource Center of Nantucket.

The resource center came into existence in March of this year in order to illuminate some of the questions that immigrants on the island have regarding anything from getting a Social Security card to getting immigration status questions answered by an immigration lawyer.

The group began with the



Photo by Nicole Harnishfeger

From left, Rev. Linda Simmons, Vanessa Rendeiro, Regina Zinser and Debbie DuBois of the Immigrant Resource Center of Nantucket at the Unitarian Meeting House.

Unitarian Universalist Church after a number of recent immigrants approached Rev. Linda Simmons and other church members to ask if there was some way to compile and reference the many practical and complex questions that immigrants have.

At the first meeting, about 60 people showed up and voiced their concerns, many of them stemming from the isolationist rhetoric they were hearing from the Trump administration and the travel ban and changes being made to the United States immigration policy.

"What we heard most was that people didn't feel an integral part of the community in that sense. They wanted to feel if something happened, they would have a place to go, that people would know that something had happened," Simmons said.

Clergy members from different congregations on the island began lending assistance and then some community members not affiliated with a church began to ask how they, too, could become involved.

"What I've observed is that each group of folks, whether they're from El Salvador or Jamaica or Ireland or from Nepal seems to support new immigrants. I think perhaps we could have done this work sooner, but I think it wasn't quite as necessary. A lot had to do with the change in immigration policies," Debbie DuBois said.

With America's immigra-

tion policies coming more under scrutiny, DuBois said that it was exciting to see so many immigrants and natives come together to answer the question "What can I do to act locally?"

A list of frequently-asked questions was compiled as part of the Immigrant Resource Center to help others clear up obstacles to obtaining better health and tax information, get a Social Security number, food or clothing resources that are already offered to the community.

"It is a matter of course that on a small island that clergy are very much in touch with immigrant communities and become perhaps resources," Simmons said.

"We have got this hub that is more than ecumenical and more than interfaith, it's a real cross section of our island."

The group now meets on the first Monday of each month from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. with a Spanish interpreter, Portuguese interpreter and a pro bono immigration lawyer only a phone call away to help new arrivals learn what they need to know.

"We are here and maybe we don't have all the answers but we're here to help you and we're going to find them together," Rendeiro said.

The Unitarian Church has been petitioning the state to create a Safe Driving Bill to deal with some of the hurdles immigrants face in getting a license to drive and obtain insurance.

"If they could choose, they would not drive at all, but there are no year-round public transportation services," Rendeiro said.

To transfer your driver's license from another country, you must have valid immigration status for at least 12 months from the date of application. Otherwise, a hold will be placed on your record.

The U.S. doesn't require licenses from Mexico and Canada to retake the driving test, but for people from many other countries, there are more hoops for immigrants to jump through even when there aren't visa lapses or other issues.

Currently, police chief William Pittman said island police aren't necessarily looking to flag immigrants who are not up to date with their paperwork.

"The issue that we encounter most frequently is when somebody is taken into custody and arrested, we have to ask their immigration status. That's really the only time we ask any questions regarding citizenship," Pittman said.

"If they provide false documentation, that's a problem. If they provide any kind of legal documentation, they would just be summonsed to court."

If an individual is arrested and jailed, their fingerprints are entered into a database that would alert ICE to their immigration status.

To assuage some of these fears, the Immigrant Resource Center hopes to let the public know that no matter a person's immigration status, the community will embrace and support them.

"We are all joined together, no matter what country we came from or how long ago our ancestors came from that country," Simmons said.

If you are interested in helping at the Immigrant Resource Center, email [immigrationresourcecenter@gmail.com](mailto:immigrationresourcecenter@gmail.com).

The next open day for the resource center is Monday, Dec. 4 from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. at the Unitarian Meeting House, 11 Orange St.