



MOHAWK VALLEY RESOURCE CENTER FOR REFUGEES

309 Genesee Street
Utica, New York 13501

Office: 315.738.1083
Fax: 315.738.1168
www.mvrcr.org

November 27, 2007

Governor Eliot Spitzer
and New York State Division of Budget

Governor Spitzer:

The NY State Citizenship Initiative is a program of NY State's Bureau of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance (BRIA). For the past 10 years this program has provided 2.5 million dollars annually to service providers across the state who assist refugees and immigrants to become naturalized citizens. This funding level has not increased for the past 10 years. The NY State Immigration Coalition and other advocacy groups have called on the state to fund the Citizenship Initiative at a level of \$10 million annually, representing a four-fold increase over the current \$2.5 million the program receives.

Each year there are more than 100,000 immigrants that come to NY State. This program supports only a small number of these immigrants. Annually, the program supports approximately 4,000 applications with 1,100 of these obtaining citizenship according to the NY State Bureau of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance.

The Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees has been the only provider of services specific to refugees and immigrants between Syracuse and Albany for more than 25 years. In that time we have resettled more than 12,000 refugees from over 31 different nationalities. This has left Oneida County with the 4th highest concentration of refugees per capita (according to the Office of Refugee Resettlement's 2005 allocation table) in the country and Utica with a refugee and former refugee population of nearly 12%. It is this trend, and other similar immigration trends across New York State that prompted a November 2006 analysis by the New York State Federal Reserve to suggest "upstate New York's foreign-born residents... contribute to the region's human capital in important ways."

MVRCR has been the sole provider of the Citizenship Initiative between Syracuse and Albany since the program's inception. Between January 2005 and September 2007 the center received \$112,759 in support of this program, maximizing our earnings on this performance base contract. During this same time period, the center expended just over \$150,000, the shortfall having been covered by fundraising and other programs at the center. This clearly demonstrates that the program is not sufficiently funded. In calendar year 2007 alone, the Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees helped nearly 700 people apply for citizenship and witnessed 350 participants achieve citizenship.

In August 2007, following our submission in June of the same year an application to renew the contract with BRIA, MVRCR received a notice that the center had been awarded \$162,864 for a 36 month period beginning October 1, 2007. This represents an increase of \$50,105 for

Many Cultures. One Community

approximately the same period of time. We were, of course, elated. We would be able to continue to provide citizenship services to the immigrant community throughout Oneida County and the surrounding area. Unfortunately, we received a verbal notice from BRIA in early November that due to a formula error, the center's award was incorrect and that the corrected formula would award the center less than \$30,000 for the same period of time. According to BRIA, the total funding for the program is insufficient to cover the statewide demands of the program. The corrected formula, which was adopted for the current funding cycle, diverts resources away from Oneida County to other regions in the state.

Because the funding for the program is insufficient to cover the statewide demand for this valuable assistance, we look to be losing Citizenship Initiative funding and may have to close the program. This means that 700 or more friends, neighbors, entrepreneurs and business owners throughout Oneida County and beyond who might apply to become citizens of this great land, may not receive the important assistance they need.

According to members of our community, including elected officials, the loss of this program in our community would be tragic. Assemblywoman RoAnn M. Destito recently said: "The thousands of refugees who now call the Mohawk Valley their home have added many things to our region; they have revitalized many neighborhoods in the City of Utica, and they have proven to be reliable and productive workers for many of our area's businesses. This funding serves a valuable purpose, helping these new residents to assimilate, learn about our nation's history, customs, and laws. Loss of this needed appropriation will hurt these new residents' efforts to become new citizens."

We call for the governor and the legislature to fully fund this program at the \$10 million level to ensure that the documented immigrant population, which has contributed enormously to the growth and development of communities in Oneida County and across New York State, do not lose this valuable assistance.

Sincerely,



Azira Tabucic
Citizenship and Immigration Manager



Peter D. Vogelaar
Executive Director