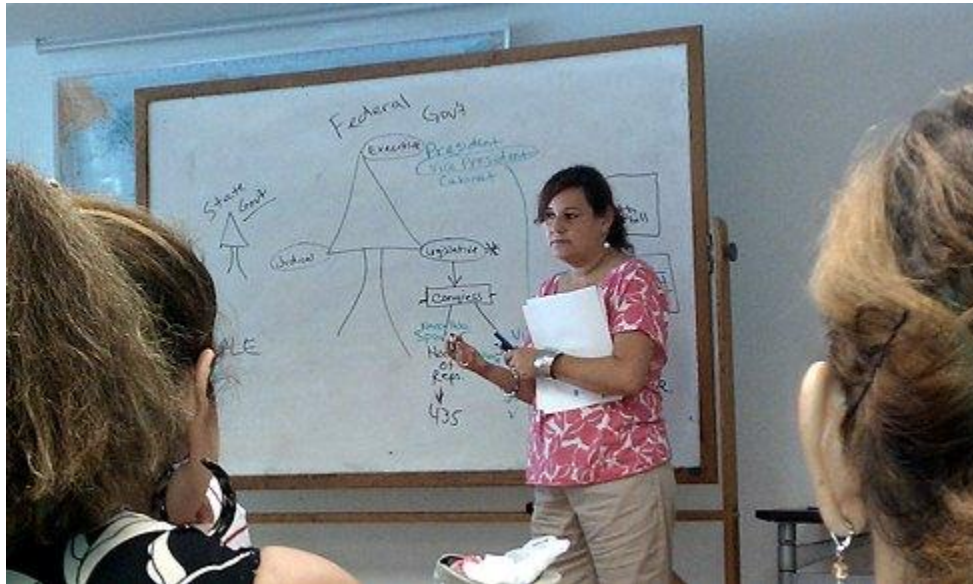


Hartford Library Offers Path to Citizenship

by Hugh McQuaid | Sep 27, 2010 6:55am



Zaida Hernandez of Catholic Charities teaches class

HARTFORD – Last week the Hartford Public Library announced that it was one of 75 organizations across the country to be selected from a pool of 1,000 applications to be awarded a \$100,000 grant from the US Citizenship and Integration Services.

The money, funded through Department of Homeland Security Appropriations Act of 2010, is designed to help the library expand a decade-old program that prepares lawful permanent residents for citizenship and the naturalization process, according to Homa Naficy, the Multicultural Education and Outreach Manager.

Since the program was founded in 2000 through a grant from the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, it's helped around 50 immigrants each year through the citizenship process with weekly classes at the library's main branch, Naficy said.

With the new grant, Naficy is preparing to offer similar classes at branches in the North and South end of the city. But the library's resources for people looking to pass the citizenship test extend beyond the classes.

The American Place, the library's citizenship resource center, was named a model for such programs in a 2008 report from the President's Taskforce on New Americans, according to a press release.

Located on the second floor of the main branch, The American Place offers free access to books, tapes, and DVDs designed to teach everything from the English language to American history.

“It’s sort of a one-stop shopping center for all the resources they need” to pass the citizenship test, Zaidi Hernandez said. Hernandez is an immigration specialist with the Catholic Charities Archdiocese of Hartford, one of the library’s immigration partners.

On Saturday, Hernandez taught a group of 14 people in a library classroom. Her students were men and women of a variety of different ethnicities and the exercises focused on reinforcing English reading and writing skills through discussion of American government, geography, and history.

“The Emancipation Proclamation freed the slaves,” Hernandez said, standing in front of a whiteboard. After the class repeated the phrase back to her she offered her students some advice on pronouncing the English “tion” sound and then stopped to explain the concept of slavery.

“I want you to make mistakes here because we can fix them here,” she told them.

Hernandez has been teaching similar classes for the last two years and said that it can be a challenging task because her students come from many different language backgrounds and arrive with varying levels of proficiency.

Her students seemed to appreciate her efforts.

“It’s been a lot of help to me,” Carlos Rodriguez said of the program. “And this lady is a very good teacher.”

Rodriguez, 47, moved to Hartford from Pereira, Colombia. He’s preparing to take the citizenship test in November when he reaches the five-year permanent residency requirement.

“I’ve learned about civil rights and history, the things every citizen is supposed to know about where they live,” he said.

He was so impressed with the program he recommended it to another Colombia native, Monica Sterling, who lives in Bristol. He also is hoping his daughter will move here and take the classes after she graduates from the University of Colombia.

Rodriguez’s outreach to others in the community is something organizers appreciate, because recruitment is part of the effort.

In partnership with local cultural organizations, the library is planning recruit individuals of different backgrounds to become “citizenship guides.” The idea is for the guides to become familiar with all the resources the library has to offer and to help others take advantage of them, Naficy said.

She is hoping the citizenship guide program creates a ripple effect.

“It encourages volunteerism,” she said. If people are able to successfully use the program, then hopefully they will want to become citizenship guides.

The idea seems to be resonating. On Tuesday the library announced it had been awarded another grant, this one for \$637,896.

The National Leadership Grant, awarded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, will help to fund the training of the library’s group of volunteers and also establish a city advisory counsel on inclusivity, according to a press release. The goal is for the newly established counsel to “transcend the existing naturalization process to give immigrants a specific sense of belonging in America ,and experience as active community participants and future civic-minded individuals” the press release said.

One of the partners recruiting guides will be the Hartford Public School District, she said. A number of youth already are instrumental in helping their parents navigate available systems and resources so the library will be looking to recruit high school seniors to teach others, she said.

Another portion of the grant will help update The American Place’s resources, Naficy said.

Implementation of the grant money will begin in October and Naficy is hoping that the headway they make from the one-time grant can be used later as leverage for more funding. But for now, she said that the library is honored that the USCIS chose to recognize their efforts.

“It really shows that they value our work,” she said.