

State aids immigrants with free service centers

Office for New Americans puts modest funds behind the mighty cause of citizenship

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[Some governors](#) have told immigrants to go away. New York's Andrew Cuomo is not one of them.

Last week, Gov. Cuomo and Secretary of State Cesar A. Peralas announced the launch of the Office for New Americans, the first statewide office with the exclusive aim of assisting New York's immigrants.



Linda Sarsour, executive director of the Arab American Association, which is getting state funds to help naturalize non-citizens. Photo: Shadi Bushra

“You have a lot of states taking the position that immigration is a bad thing,” Cuomo said after Peralas announced the program during a cabinet meeting open to the press. “The first point this makes is, philosophically, our perspective is the exact opposite. We see immigrants as a source of a strength, good for the workforce, good for the community.”

And not just last week. Since last October, 27 neighborhood-based nonprofit agencies across the state have used funds from the program to offer free services for immigrants, including intensive English language classes, consults with immigration lawyers about the naturalization process and seminars on entrepreneurship.

These so-called Opportunity Centers are housed at existing organizations around the city and state, which each received one-year \$150,000 grants with the possibility of renewal for up to two more years.

Linda Sarsour, executive director of the [Arab American Association](#) in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, said that the Opportunity Center grant was “totally a huge jump” for her 12-year-old organization.

Before the governor’s grant money came through, people interested in taking an English as a second language class at the Arab American Association had to join a 140-person waiting list and wait at least 10 months for a spot to open up.

The grant allowed Sarsour to hire two new staff members, including an additional English instructor.

“When the Opportunity Center came along, in one sweep we were able to knock out that entire waiting list,” Sarsour said.

Other Opportunity Centers throughout New York City reported their grant money had helped them expand their services, whether through new notebooks for English classes, help for young adults [seeking protection from deportation](#) under a new Obama administration initiative, or office hours for an on-site immigration attorney.

On the first Monday of every month an immigration lawyer funded through the Office for New Americans spends the day at the Arab American Association providing free legal consultations for immigrants with questions about applying for citizenship. Sarsour said her organization had worked with free legal service providers in the past, but they were not always available when needed.

“Now I know that’s my [legal] contact, that’s where I go and they’ve been very responsive,” Sarsour said. “It’s a much easier process.”

Sam Palmer-Simon, a staff attorney at the New York Legal Assistance Group and one of four immigration attorneys hired through the new state office, is working with eight Opportunity Centers across Staten Island, Queens and Long Island. He said they’ve all used his services — even those that already have attorneys on staff.

“There’s such a need that these organizations with attorneys recognize that I don’t need to misplace anyone’s work away from them,” he said. “I can take on whatever overflow they have.”

There’s no shortage of demand for legal and other services: the U.S. Census counts more than 2 million New Yorkers who are not citizens, more than 10 percent of the state’s entire population. The doors will be open to undocumented immigrants as well as those with visas, since the Office for New Americans will not require proof of legal status. All this comes on a slender budget of less than \$6 million, from federal funds and the governor’s funds.

“The idea that that much money could provide services to 4 million immigrants in New York state of course doesn’t make sense,” said David Kallick, a senior fellow at the Fiscal Policy Institute, an economic research organization that has studied the welfare of New York’s

immigrants. Nonetheless, Kallick called the Office for New Americans “very much the right idea,” saying it would supplement existing services.

Mark Falzone, deputy director of the National Immigration Forum in Washington, D.C., said the Office for New Americans could take on a more significant role if comprehensive immigration reform comes out of the capital after its expected introduction to the House and Senate [this spring](#).

“Once that happens, these centers are going to be crucial,” Falzone said. “The government is making a good move by doing it proactively, because obviously the demand for these centers will increase if the bill passes.”

It’s one thing to offer services; another to get clients through the door, especially when they may be intimidated by fear of entanglements with authorities. Hence the program’s strategy of using small, community-based groups as the point of entry.

“For government — whether it’s the city or the state— to provide services and reach immigrants, you really have to partner with local organizations,” said Jonathan Bowles, the executive director of the Center for an Urban Future, a think tank that tracks immigrant entrepreneurship.

Dio Gica, who oversees the Opportunity Centers at the Staten Island and Flushing YMCA, tries to keep the atmosphere welcoming, and to use English and other classes as a way to build relationships with participants.

“When you go to a government agency, it may be in a big building and that’s intimidating,” Gica said.

“It has to be a welcoming environment the minute they walk in the door.”