

**“Get Smart, Know your Rights”**  
By Judy Wyman Kelly

If there was a central theme to Thursday morning’s public workshop on improving access for immigrant families and children, it was “get smart, know your rights.” The September 17 event, planned to coincide with National Welcoming America week, was co-sponsored by the Connecticut Department of Consumer Protection and Hartford Public Library’s, *The American Place*. A panel of experts spoke on topics ranging from consumer protection, housing, employment, driver’s licenses, healthcare, legal issues, and ethnic media, with time at the end for questions from the audience.



Audience members

Commissioner of Consumer Protection, Jonathan Harris, welcomed the panelists and more than 50 participants, praising the contributions immigrants make every day to the state’s economy and culture. “We need to say, ‘Hello’ and not, ‘Hell No!,’ to our immigrant community,” Harris affirmed.



Commissioner Jonathan Harris making opening remarks

As the panelists were soon to explain, however, immigrants are all too often fed misinformation and fall victim to fraud and scams. Nicole Ayola, attorney at the Department of Consumer Protection, opened by talking about “notario” fraud, whereby immigrants are duped into believing that “notarios” are legally-sanctioned attorneys qualified to help them obtain citizenship, when in fact they are fraudulent imposters. Worse than the hundreds of dollars the victim loses to the scammer is the fact that the fraudulent application could jeopardize future chances for citizenship. And yet, many victims are afraid to notify the authorities. Ayola implored the audience to help out by informing the department of any scam attempts.



Left to right, Marlene Rubin, Cesar Aleman, and Nicole Ayola

Cesar Aleman, Community Outreach Coordinator for the Connecticut Fair Housing Center, discussed his organization’s efforts to protect people from discrimination in housing matters. He also mentioned a new “Move-in” guide, available in translation, that provides, among other things, information on how to qualify for various programs, tips for choosing the right place to live, and a list of important resources.

Marlene Rubin, Social Security Administration Officer, summarized benefits and employment eligibility requirements for legal immigrants, refugees, and students. As the regulations can be complicated and vary depending on visa status, Rubin welcomed people to contact her office for further support and clarification.

Amish Patel, Department of Motor Vehicles, summarized the various licenses available to Connecticut residents, focusing primarily on requirements for immigrants. In January 2015, Connecticut became one of ten states nationally to launch a new “drive only” license for undocumented immigrants. The response has been overwhelming. Over 60,000 undocumented drivers have signed up to take the written permit and road tests, many waiting more than one

year for their appointments. The permit test is available in translation in a handful of languages.



Left to right, Emanuela Leaf, Michael Bonsignore, Sean King, Amish Patel, and Marlene Rubin.

Sean King, attorney at the Office of the Healthcare Advocate, described the office’s mission to improve health care access for everyone. The policies are extremely complicated, with coverage and eligibility depending on visa status, “lawfully” present status, and other criteria. King, too, encouraged people to email or call the office for support and clarification at [healthcareadvocate@ct.gov](mailto:healthcareadvocate@ct.gov) or 866-466-4466.

Attorney Michael Bonsignore spoke about his work in immigrant and refugee law, touching on the seven main eligibility requirements for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy, including age and date of arrival in the U.S., length of continuous residence in the U.S., enrollment in U.S. schools, and check of criminal record. To avoid any complications, Bonsignore emphasized the importance of being well informed and working with

an expert when filling out and filing applications. Erika Taylor, Community Relations Officer for USCIS, reminded participants that citizens and immigrants are always welcome to visit the USCIS information room to get answers to all immigration-related questions from a live officer.



Left to right standing, Catherine Blinder and Erika Taylor

The panel concluded with remarks from journalist Emanuela Leaf, editor of the trilingual ethnic paper, *Tribuna*. Leaf addressed the importance of understanding cultural context, explaining that all immigrants arrived with their own histories and experiences. “We have to meet people where they are, understand their baggage,” she said. The paper is published in Spanish, Portuguese, and English to ensure that everyone will receive the same information at the same time. Additionally, by publishing in an immigrant’s native tongue, the paper is showing that “someone cares.” Leaf sees “ethnic media as playing a vital role in educating immigrants about what they need to know.”

During Q&A, when asked to identify challenges in communications with immigrants, panelists cited building trusting relationships, improving translation capacity, raising literacy



levels, erasing misconceptions about and distrust of government offices, and removing fear of deportation. Education is an important first step. As Catherine Blinder, Chief of Education Outreach for the Department of Consumer Protection, pointed out, it is important to “know your rights, so you are empowered to complain.” Following the conclusion of the session, audience members were invited to engage in casual conversation with the panelists.



One-on-one with the panelists



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