

Portland Senior Summit 2004

A Summary

The fourth annual Portland Senior Summit took place on June 15, 2004 at Keeley's Banquet Center in Portland, Maine. In response to the growing number of immigrant and refugee families living in the Portland community, the topic for this conference was ***Cross-Cultural Caring: Reaching Out to a Culturally Diverse Senior Population***. A record number of 88 senior service providers, representing 35 local agencies, attended this event. The day's agenda covered a wide range of information useful to professionals working with elderly clients from a variety of racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Portland City Councilor and Former Mayor of Portland, Cheryl A. Leeman opened the conference in the morning by welcoming participants and thanking them for their continued commitment to serving senior citizens from all walks of life in Portland. Ms. Leeman was the first to introduce the idea of bringing service providers together at a Portland Senior Summit four years ago, when she made senior citizen issues a part of her 5-point mayoral platform.

A rousing keynote address was presented by **Gerald E. Talbot**, a Portland senior citizen, who has been a persistent advocate of civil and human rights and an outspoken opponent of racism, discrimination, and hate in Portland for over 40 years. In 1972, he became the first African-American ever elected to the Maine Legislature, serving 3 terms.

A past president of the Maine NAACP, Gerald Talbot has served with many other local, state, and National organizations. Mr. Talbot was the recipient of 1980 Jefferson Award. In February of 1995, he donated his collection of documents pertaining to the African American experience and his own family history, whose roots in Maine go back to the 1700's, to the University of Southern Maine. Although he is retired, Mr. Talbot and Harriet Price are now in the process of writing a book, entitled ***Visible Black History in Maine***.

The first session of the morning was entitled ***Changing Demographics: Who are the New Mainers?*** This comprehensive overview of how cultural demographics have changed in Southern Maine over the past ten years was presented by **Grace Valenzuela, Director of Multi-Lingual and Multi-Cultural Affairs for Portland Public Schools**. Grace Valenzuela is an immigrant from the Philippines who became a U.S. citizen in 1985 and has lived in Portland since 1986. She is a community activist involved in many civic and community organizations such as Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project, Institute for Civic Leadership, and World Affairs Council. She is also the President and co-founder of the Asian American Heritage Foundation.

Ms. Valenzuela is familiar with the many different groups of immigrants and refugees who make their homes in the Portland area because of her work in local schools. She has compiled statistics, based on the last two census reports, about which cultures the "New Mainers" represent, how many people in each group, where they are living, and how the changing numbers correlate with wars and other catastrophic events occurring in their countries of origin.

Part Two of the morning workshop was a ***Multi-Cultural Panel***, discussing how elders are viewed and treated by society and their families in five different cultures. Grace Valenzuela facilitated the discussion by asking the same question (s) to older adults from Korea, Sudan, Russia, Viet Nam, and Somalia. In all the countries except Russia, elderly citizens are respected as leaders in their community, and revered for their wisdom and intrinsic value to the family unit. Conference participants were given an opportunity to ask their own questions as well. Panelists gave moving examples of how difficult it can be for seniors coming from these countries to assimilate to the American way of life because of the very different role elders play in this society.

Lunch was served on-site at noon. Extra time was allowed for participants to network with one another and share resource materials. This has become an important part of the Summit agenda, as there are always new agencies or programs for seniors springing up in the community. It is also a chance for old friends and colleagues to “talk shop” and catch up on what is happening in the senior service arena.

To kick off the afternoon session, **Dolly Hersom, RISinterpret Coordinator for Catholic Charities Maine**, presented a workshop on ***Working Effectively with Interpreters***. Ms. Hersom used humorous role play to show what NOT to do when using an interpreter and offered nuts and bolts information on how to make the most of interpreter services when working with an elderly client who does not speak English.

Following an afternoon break, the conference continued with the ***Cultural Skill Workshop: An African Refugee Perspective***, presented by **Suzanna Dunlap and Laurie McDonnell of the Portland and Lewiston Refugee Collaborative**. This segment included a Power Point presentation showing some terminology and definitions of various immigrant and refugee status. Suzanna Dunlap also illustrated the extreme trauma and turmoil experienced by most refugees before they ever reach the United States. Laurie McDonnell facilitated a panel discussion with three Portland and Lewiston Refugee Collaborative staff, representing African countries. Their words provided a unique “sensitizing” effect on participants. Real life stories and case scenarios were used to demonstrate that there is much to be learned about elderly African immigrants and refugees before we can do effective outreach and provide them with “culturally competent” programs and services.

At the end of the day, **Gerald R. Cayer, Director of Portland’s Health and Human Services Department**, shared his thoughts and experiences in planning how Portland can provide needed services and resources for the hundreds of “New Mainers” coming into the city each year. He spoke of how much we continue to learn as a community, and how proud he is of Portland-based provider agencies who strive to be welcoming, want to understand cultures different from their own, and hope to serve these populations well now and in the years to come.