



New Corner in Some NYC Libraries is All about Building Small Businesses

By: Alexis Stephens



From bodega owners and day care providers to dry cleaners and the guy running your favorite take-out joint, immigrant entrepreneurs are powering many urban economies. Nearly half of New York City's small business owners are immigrants, according to the Fiscal Policy Institute.

“If you’re living in New York, you know that that’s true,” says Nisha Agarwal, commissioner of NYC Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA). “You know it from living in neighborhoods and traveling around. You experience it.”

While tight-knit immigrant communities are finding ways to inform newcomers about how to start a small business, there’s a lack of training and business development programs — especially multilingual ones — that would help small businesses grow and further enmesh them into the larger New York City commercial community.

In May, the New York City Department of Small Business Services (SBS) announced a partnership with the Brooklyn Public Library, New York Public Library and Queens Public Library to provide free on-site business courses in eight languages, multilingual materials and training for library staff to help them assist immigrants looking to start or grow their businesses.

“The tri-library initiative is a part of a larger undertaking on our end to enhance, improve and make more robust our services to immigrants,” says Maria Torres-Springer, SBS commissioner.

A New Americans Corner at the Flatlands branch of the Brooklyn Public Library

She says that libraries were a natural choice for this program because of their role as neighborhood anchors and safe, welcoming institutions for immigrants, who might be less trusting of other government entities.

The Center for an Urban Future finds that of the 10 library branches in the city with the highest circulation, six are located in neighborhoods like Flushing and Elmhurst in Queens where immigrants make up a disproportionate share of the population.

“Many of our library partners have started civics education programs, because they just had so many people coming in and asking questions,” says Agarwal. Through this new partnership, libraries will be setting up “New Americans Corners,” where MOIA will be providing in-kind resources and information about obtaining citizenship as well as outreach events.

So far, 25 branch libraries have implemented the programming provided by SBS, MOIA and the libraries. Torres-Springer says that the hope is to have the program in 100 libraries by the end of the year.

This initiative sits along other immigrant-targeted programs from SBS like the Immigrant Business Initiative.

Colombian-born Rosa Echeverri has taken advantage of the Immigrant Business Initiative since 2012. After opening Go Babies Child Care in Elmhurst in 2011, she took classes with the Business Outreach

Center Network after hearing about the program through a friend.

“I took several courses,” says Echeverri. “They taught us how to handle cash flow, Excel, and how to organize our income.” She’s enrolled in an upcoming course in QuickBooks, which will be taught in Spanish.

“I think it’s a good opportunity for providers, because we always need training,” continues Echeverri. “Sometimes we just know about taking care of children, but it’s very important for us to know how to manage the business side.”

Yesterday, Agarwal and Torres-Springer helped to spread the word about their effort through a panel discussion on advancing citizenship and economic empowerment with the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services at the Brooklyn Public Library’s Central branch.

“Being a daughter of immigrants who started various small businesses, I spent a lot of time translating for my parents as they interacted with government agencies,” says Torres-Springer. “I have an acute sense of what it means when services provided by government are accessible and effective and when they’re not. . . . We have to make sure we’re delivering these services and it’s not just that you can take advantage of them if you’re lucky.”