

CITY SHORTS NEWCOMERS ON ENGLISH

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Body

ONE OF THE FEW things everybody agrees on when it comes to immigration is the need for **newcomers** to learn **English**.

Yet by not setting aside enough funds for **English** classes in its proposed \$48 billion 2006 budget, **City** Hall is making it very difficult for thousands of immigrants to learn it.

That's why, as the final negotiations over the 2006 **city** budget begin, dozens of people - immigrants and their advocates - gathered at **City** Hall on Thursday. They called on Mayor Bloomberg and the **City** Council to each allocate \$10 million for immigrant services in the new budget.

"We need to make adult literacy and **English** classes a priority in the **city** budget," said Nancy Wackstein, executive director of United Neighborhood Houses, one of the speakers.

It makes sense.

New York's economy is heavily dependent on immigrant workers, who make up about half of the **city's** workforce. And, of course, the better educated these workers are, the better it is for them and their future, but also for the whole **city**.

"This year the **city** has a record surplus of over \$3 billion. The \$20 million we are asking for immigrant community programs represents less than 1% of that," said Margie McHugh, executive director of the New York Immigration Coalition, one of the most active groups seeking fairness and opportunity for immigrants.

"There is a strong sense in immigrant communities that they are not getting their fair share of **city** resources," McHugh added. "Elected officials can begin to address that by increasing funding for the immigrant initiative."

McHugh was referring to a program called Immigrant Opportunities Initiative. Actually, the **City** Hall protesters were asking for more funding for this initiative. The additional money would be invested in more **English** classes, and also in immigration and employment legal services.

Paradoxically, despite the rapid growth of the immigrant population, the program has not received any substantial funding increase since its inception in 2001. While it had a \$2.5 million budget when it started, today it is funded at \$2.8 million.

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Yet there are more than two million adult New Yorkers who are not proficient in English, an increase of 30% from 1990 to 2000, according to the city Planning Department figures.

With classroom seats for only one of every 25 New Yorkers who are willing and able to learn English, there is no doubt of the need for greater funding.

Also, as Yu Soung Moon, executive director of YKASEC-Empowering the Korean Community in Queens, made clear, "Without legal assistance too many immigrant workers have no recourse when they are paid below minimum wage, exploited or deprived of other rights and benefits." YKASEC runs a legal clinic for Asian-American workers with city funding.

Increasing the funding to help immigrants learn English, become citizens, avoid exploitation and legally reunite with family members would make their integration into American society smoother, which is the fair - and smart - thing to do.

It also is a great investment in guaranteeing a better future for New York. After all, these are people who make important economic and cultural contributions to the city and the country on a daily basis. And who, thank goodness, are here to stay. aruiz@nydailynews.com

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