

Good Works: Dedicated to serving immigrants

La Crosse Community Foundation

The Coulee Region Immigration Task Force knows the cultural and economic vitality immigrants have to offer the region. That's why they're dedicated to supporting these individuals by advocating for their rights, educating the public, and helping immigrants integrate into the local area.

Through partnerships with organizations and initiatives aimed at overcoming barriers like language and access to resources, CRITF strives to build a more inclusive and welcoming environment for both new and established immigrants. Their efforts ensure that all members of the community can thrive together.

Marta Martinez, an immigrant from Uruguay, has been a task force member since 2016. Because her native language is Spanish, she works easily with the monolingual Spanish-speaking members of the Latino community.

How does Coulee Region Immigration Task Force help people build new connections that provide a sense of belonging and community in a new place?

Recent immigrants are often refugees or are fleeing from horrific circumstances. We of the task force are called upon to support them, whom we consider our brothers and sisters, in the face of severe injustice and grave dangers. We try to connect them with Western Technical College and Centro Latino so that they might start to study the English language — as we believe their lack of English skills is the biggest barrier they find in this country. We continually coordinate with other organizations to identify and hopefully meet their needs.

What inspired you to engage with the task force and what motivates you to stay engaged?

When a friend invited me to be a member of CRITF, I was impressed to learn what this organization was doing to meet the different needs of immigrants. I have an anecdote. I remember when, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we received a grant from the La Crosse-based Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, and our group distributed checks to 50 families needing help to pay rent and utilities. After that first distribution, we received thank you cards from several of them. I felt very sad when I read some of them expressing thanks for the help but even more so for considering them members of this community. Do you understand what that means? It means that within the larger community, many of them feel isolated, ignored, and discriminated against.

How can others get involved with the Coulee Region Immigration Task Force to help create a more welcoming community for all?

There are a number of ways one can get involved with the Coulee Region Immigration Task Force. Our committee meets on the third Thursday of each month by Zoom or in person. At this time, we are specifically addressing the issue of undocumented immigrants' inability to receive state-issued driver's licenses. So this issue has led us to seek collaboration with the La Crosse Police Department regarding sensitivity to immigrant issues, especially the issue of immigrants who are forced to drive without a license. A second area of CRITF activity: Years ago, we gave money to Western Technical College to create an endowment to give scholarships to students with DACA or without documents. More recently, we also received a grant to give scholarships independently to immigrants and/or their children who are studying at Viterbo.

We also collaborate with an affiliate organization, Centro Latino, which provides resources for newly arrived immigrants (including language training). This organization would also welcome any new volunteer wishing to get involved — especially someone who would want to help as an English language tutor.

In July, we organized a public forum titled “Changing the Narrative of Migration,” which took place at the La Crosse Public Library. A capacity crowd attended. There were several presentations from people like Eileen McKenzie, FSPA, who works with the Kino Border Initiative in Nogales, Mexico; a DACA recipient (this is the special program of the federal government to allow young undocumented individuals to obtain a Social Security Number and therefore work legally and obtain a driver's license); and a representative of Milwaukee's Voces De La Frontera, among others who are deeply engaged in addressing issues facing immigrants.

The good news is that CRITF is planning a similar program that will take place on November 21st at the Capella Performing Arts Center in La Crosse. We invite all La Crosse citizens to get involved in any of the ways described above. Please check our website at couleeregionitf.com to connect with us.

Good Works is a feature provided by the La Crosse Community Foundation highlighting the efforts of people and organizations working to build a more vibrant, generous and inclusive community.