

ILLITERACY ON LI CALL FOR

Agencies appeal for volunteers as hundreds wait for tutors

BY LAUREN R. HARRISON
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Hundreds of names fill the waiting lists of adult literacy organizations in Nassau and Suffolk counties as high demand for skills in reading, writing and speaking English grows and the groups say they desperately need more volunteer tutors.

More than 500 adults are on the waiting list for Literacy Suffolk's free literacy tutoring program — both basic learners who read below a sixth-grade level and those learning English as a second language. Some have been waiting since 2010, said Gini Booth, the nonprofit's executive director.

"We've lost some tutors who have had to return to the job market," Booth said. "So we have to recruit more, and it's very difficult when the economy is so bad."

At Literacy Nassau, about 125 adults are on the waiting list. Karen Micciche, the organization's executive director, said the number of applicants more than doubled this year as compared with two years ago.

The state of the economy, competition for jobs and immigrants' need for English-language skills for workplace success are three factors behind the greater demand for services, Micciche said.

"If you're a functionally illiterate middle-age person, it's easy to get passed by" amid skilled young adults looking for jobs, she said. As for immigrants, "People are coming here with lots and lots of education in their home country, and they can't find jobs that equal the level of education that they have attained in their home country because of the language barrier."

The numbers represent a snapshot of the total picture on Long Island, as these two groups focus on improving

skills for adults who read below a sixth-grade level. But the trend holds true for other literacy organizations here, too, said Martin Murphy, director of the Long Island Regional Adult Education Network. In addition to Literacy Suffolk and Literacy Nassau, the network assists 22 other groups funded by the state Education Department, collectively serving about 20,000 adults on Long Island.

"We're limited in our capacity and the need is continuing to grow, and that's a problem," Murphy said.

Illiteracy rates high

A new national literacy assessment of adults is under way, with results expected to become public next fall, said Peggy Carr, associate commissioner for assessment at the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics.

Fourteen percent of Suffolk County adults ages 16 and older lacked basic literacy skills necessary to perform everyday activities in 2003, the last time the department compiled its National Assessment of Adult Literacy. That number represents more than 160,000 people — up from 12 percent in 1992, when the previous assessment was conducted.

Ten percent of Nassau County adults, or more than 105,000 people, lacked basic literacy skills in 2003, up from 9 percent in 1992, the assessment showed.

All told, 30 million adults across the country were estimated in 2003 to have below-basic literacy skills, with New York State having the second-highest percentage — 22 percent — behind California.

Skills taken for granted

Children's librarian Susann Farrell, 42, of Flanders, was surprised by the large numbers on



Willie Nunn, 61, said his desire to read to his grandchildren motivated him to participate in a literacy

Long Island and decided to volunteer as a tutor.

"Society expects you to be able to read and write regardless of what challenges and obstacles that you've had growing up. There's that stigma that if you didn't learn it, that there's something wrong with you," she said last month after her graduation from Literacy Suffolk's 12-hour training program, where tutors learned strategies to work with students.

The shame can be paralyzing, especially for natives. One Long Beach man declined to be interviewed for this story, fearing

what his colleagues and child's schoolmates might think.

Donald Chiappetta, 67, will never forget the surprise party he was given on his 40th birthday. Everything was great, he said, until the friends, neighbors and relatives gathered at his Dix Hills home asked him to read humorous birthday cards out loud.

"At that point my heart stopped, and I thought, 'Oh, boy, I'm in trouble.' Being a nonreader for so many years, I was able to escape having to read for someone," he said. "I would say, 'Oh gee, I'm sorry, I left my glasses at home.' . . .

But being in my own home, I had nowhere to go."

Carolyn, his wife of 47 years, came to the rescue that evening — as she had since they were high school sweethearts, when she did his homework. At that time, he got by as a popular varsity baseball player and a teacher favorite. As an adult, he managed with his wits — memorizing everything from the number of train stops to get to the Bay Ridge food business he co-owned to the labels of products stocked on its shelves.

"It's such a stressful, stressful day, every single day of your life

HELP



PHOTO BY LINDA ROSIER

The U.S. Department of Education is to release new adult literacy statistics in the fall of 2013. In 2003, it found:

More than 160,000

Suffolk County adults aged 16 and older — 14% — lacked basic literacy skills.

More than 105,000

Nassau County adults aged 16 and older — 10% — lacked basic literacy skills.

About 3.3 million

New York State adults aged 16 and older — 22% — lacked basic literacy skills, the second-highest percentage nationwide.

tutoring program last year.

when you're a nonreader," said Donald Chiappetta, who is now on Literacy Suffolk's board.

Seeking, receiving help

Willie Nunn, 61, of Roosevelt, knew the "I don't have my glasses" line all too well. The retired sewer maintenance supervisor once used it as an excuse in church, because he couldn't read Bible passages. Finally, his desire to read to his grandchildren drove him to seek tutoring from Literacy Nassau in January 2011.

He has learned to sound out words that are difficult to pronounce. "If I'm not sure of a

word, I'll ask," he said. "You have to be able to put your pride to the side to be able to learn something."

Students meet with tutors for about two hours each week at local libraries. The sessions are tailored to accomplish students' goals in small steps, whether they are hoping to earn a driver's license or to attain a better job.

Literacy tutoring for adults who speak other languages is offered at libraries in both counties, independent of Literacy Nassau and Literacy Suffolk. Many libraries say the need for those programs also is increasing.

"We're struggling to keep up with the demand," said Corinne Camarata, assistant director of the Port Washington Public Library, which increased the number of adult English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) sessions to 1,252 in 2011 from 1,092 in 2009. "Even with a dedicated classroom for ESOL in the library . . . we don't have enough space to keep up."

Inside a small room at a Suffolk County library, "Luis," 21, sat across from his tutor, going over fill-in-the-blank sentences with vocabulary words. Three years ago, he could not read, write or speak English. Now, the former busboy at a local restaurant has parlayed his skills to become a waiter.

"Luis," who asked that his real name not be used because he is an undocumented immigrant from Mexico, represents a portion of the population that Literacy Suffolk and Literacy Nassau serves. The organizations do not require students to submit immigration documentation.

A lover of music, he writes,



NEWSDAY PHOTO/AUDREY C. TIERNAN

Donald Chiappetta, with his wife, Carolyn, now helps others.

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Wanted: More tutors

Literacy Nassau
187 Smith St., Freeport
516-867-3580
literacynassau.org

Tutors: Call for more info. Costs are \$36 for a tutor training workshop and \$25 for a required textbook.

For other adult literacy courses, check your local library and the Long Island Regional Adult Education Network (631-293-3150).

Literacy Suffolk
627 N. Sunrise Service Rd., Bellport;
631-286-1649
literacysuffolk.org

Tutors: Call or visit the website for more information. Costs are \$35 for a training workshop; a required textbook is included.

in English, the lyrics of romantic songs in a notebook. His tutor, Bill Baker, 62, of Greenlawn, brings him a new song each week, most recently R. Kelly's "I Believe I Can Fly."

"It's inspiration when he says 'I can fly,'" Luis said after listening to the song on an iPod in the tutoring room. "I think of my dreams. I can fly."

Diana Cleasby, 40, who is from Colombia, said she has two master's degrees and a bachelor's degree in speech pathology from colleges in her native country. But the degrees were of little help when she moved to Bayville six years ago to marry her husband, Dennis, and couldn't speak English. Cleasby said she depended on her husband for communication. "English is a beautiful language," she said, "but it's not easy to learn."

Both Literacy Nassau and Literacy Suffolk test students before tutoring sessions begin and every year they are in the program. Results are reported to the state for funding purposes. Often, tutors said, improve-

ments come in baby steps.

"When you first meet a student in the beginning, you shake their hand and it's a very limp kind of thing," said Booth, of Literacy Suffolk. "Six months later, the handshake is very strong, because we're building confidence."

Building confidence was a journey for Jonathan Pamphile, 22, of West Hempstead. He survived the 2010 earthquake that destroyed much of his native Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and moved to Long Island to join family. Pamphile knew French and Creole, but not English.

After studying a dictionary every morning and evening, Pamphile eventually tested out of Literacy Nassau's program and was honored last year as Student of the Year. He is a part-time certified nurse's aide working in a nursing facility and enrolled full-time at Nassau Community College, studying physical therapy.

"I want to go forward," Pamphile said. "I want to speak clearly, very well, as an American."