

I. CHESTER COUNTY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION  
GRANT SUMMARY SHEET

Date June 29, 2023

**Contact Information**

Organization Name: The Volunteer English Program in Chester County

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Board Chair Approval (check here):

Year Incorporated: 1986

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**Organization Information:**

**Field/s of Interest:**

Arts, Culture & Humanities  Environment/Animal Welfare

Education

Health  Human Services  Religion

**Mission:** The Volunteer English Program (VEP) connects volunteers with adult English language learners to provide free one-to-one tutoring and cultural enrichment that empowers immigrants to be successful.

**Vision:** Volunteers will power our work and personify a spirit of generosity and openness. As a result, our communities will be enriched by the experiences and contributions of immigrants, and they will have the essential language and cultural skills needed to find their place, their purpose and their voice.

**Geographic Area Served** *(If not all of Chester County, specify primary Chester County regions served):*

VEP serves adult immigrants who live and or work in every community of Chester County, Pennsylvania, a total of 42 unique zip codes of the 56 in the county. The highest concentration of active students live in the West Chester (25%), Phoenixville (20%), and Coatesville (11%) regions.

**Describe Population Served & Annual Number of People Served:**

VEP teaches English and provides cultural enrichment to approximately 300 adult immigrants, men and women, ages 18 and above, annually. Of these individuals, over 63% have at least one child in the household. Latino/Hispanic community members make up the largest ethnic group at 60%, followed by Asian/South and Southeast Asian/Pacific Islanders at 21%, 16% Middle Eastern or European, and 3% African. Seventy-four percent (74%) of active students report income levels that fall within or below ALICE (Assets Limited Income Constrained Employed) thresholds for a survivable household budget. VEP students live and/or work in every community of Chester County, and contiguous areas.

**Annual Budget** \$ 380,000.00

# of Full-Time Equivalent Paid Staff 3.86

% of budget for program expenses 71%

# of Board Volunteers 9

% of budget for administrative expenses 18%

# of Active Non-Board Volunteers 245

% of budget for fundraising expenses 11%

# of Volunteer Hours 10,220 *100% total*

**Top 3-5 funding sources:** Phoenixville Community Health Foundation, Alliance for Health Equity, United Way of Chester County, The Fund for Women and Girls, Robert and Jennifer McNeil, The Wyss Foundation.

**Is this grant proposal for:** Capacity Building  or General Operating ?

**If Capacity Building Proposal, the focus is:**

Mission, Vision & Strategy  Governance & Leadership  Partnerships & Collaborations  Fundraising, Development & Marketing  Technology Other:

**Grant Amount Requested from the Community Foundation:**

\$ 7,500.00

**Proposal Summary:** The Volunteer English Program (VEP) respectfully requests \$7,500 to support general operations to fulfill an unspoken mandate in Chester County to welcome immigrants who seek to empower themselves through English language skills and understanding of American culture. This funding will ensure that VEP can carry out the essential services needed to continue supporting close to 300 adult immigrants in Chester County who are improving their lives and the lives of their families. To accomplish this, VEP will connect community volunteers with local adult English language learners to provide free one-to-one tutoring and cultural enrichment that empowers immigrants to achieve their goals. Community volunteers are prepared to serve as VEP tutors and are matched with adult learners based on their shared life or professional experiences. Students and tutors commit to working together for 3 hours/week (equivalent to 144 hours annually) for a minimum of one year.

## **II. CHESTER COUNTY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION GRANT PROPOSAL NARRATIVE**

### **1. Nonprofit's history, goals, key achievements & distinctiveness**

#### **History**

VEP was established in 1986 by 14 compassionate and motivated individuals who recognized the need for West Chester residents to achieve English literacy. Efforts resulted in an ESL tutoring program that evolved into the current model of serving new English speakers throughout the area. During 37 years of uninterrupted service, VEP has remained an independent, 501.c.3 organization, exclusively dedicated to providing student and goal-centered, one-to-one tutoring in English literacy and cultural enrichment for immigrants who live or work in Chester County.

#### **Goals**

1. The Volunteer English Program will provide free tutoring services to approximately 300 English language learners annually, for an average of 100 hours of instruction per student.
2. 100% of VEP adult learners will work toward becoming more independent in their English language skills so that they can feel safer and more confident in an English-speaking region. This includes the ability to speak without an interpreter, especially their children, or relying upon electronic translators that do not provide essential cultural clues.
3. Engage our local communities through meaningful volunteerism. By offering 5 Tutor Training Workshops, we will replenish our corps of tutors with 100 new individuals annually.
4. VEP will sustain its ability to continuously provide English language instruction to immigrants and refugees throughout Chester County as a result of generous foundation and individual contributions.

#### **Key Achievements**

As a resilient and innovative institution, VEP has consistently adapted to changing environments and immigration waves. Recent organizational achievements include:

- Building on the lessons learned through the pandemic creating programming that supports learning opportunities for students and tutors in person and online.
- Dedicating program coordinator resources to support outreach to the growing immigrant populations in the northern and western regions of the county while helping to meet the surge of requests we receive weekly for services.
- Increasing tutor engagement and retention through regularly offered professional workshops, meet-ups, and virtual training for volunteers.
- Establishing the Meredith Huffman Loving Connections Fund to financially support learners in their search for meaningful employment, citizenship, or professional credentialing, as a result of their commitment to learning the language and culture of English.
- Expanding programs for parents of preschoolers while their children attend the Head Start programs in West Chester, Coatesville, and Phoenixville eliminating the roadblock of finding quality child care so that parents can focus on learning English.
- Remaining a reliable point of entry for newly arriving individuals from around the world, most recently, politically socially, and economically challenged countries. VEP's student successes are our greatest achievements.

#### **Distinctiveness**

VEP's distinctiveness derives from the adaptability, flexibility, and accessibility of the program model. For almost four decades, VEP has been the only organization in Chester County exclusively dedicated to serving immigrants through an individualized, student- and goal-centered approach to English language learning powered by trained volunteer tutors. This approach has allowed the program to be responsive to the shifting social contexts and the demands of VEP's students' lives. Tutors design weekly instruction around the student's goals, which allows tutors to pivot lessons toward each student's most pressing language-learning needs. The program offered free of charge, meets students wherever they are on the continuum of literacy and English proficiency, regardless of income or residency status. The year-round, community-based, non-classroom model respects the needs of adults to learn at locations and times conducive to their busy lives, which makes the program achievable for all.

## **2. Funding request**

### **•Description of key initiatives**

The Volunteer English Program offers one core program—free, one-to-one English language tutoring to adult immigrants and refugees. The program is offered at no charge to students and is available for any adult, non-native English speaker who lives or works in Chester County regardless of income or residency status. The individualized model of instruction reduces traditional barriers to classroom-based, adult education posed by cost, time, and transportation. Weekly lessons are planned around the student’s most pressing learning needs and goals. Instruction takes place year-round in virtual settings or at locations that are safe, convenient, and confidential for students. Proficiency leveled books, Chromebooks, online subscriptions, and other learning materials are researched by professional staff and provided free to every student-tutor pair for the life cycle of the partnership. Throughout the year, program staff conduct new-student interviews, administer English proficiency assessments, and provide ongoing support to every student-tutor pair. Upwards of 300 adult students participate in the program annually, while we maintain a robust waiting list of nearly 200 persons. Tutors and students commit to meeting for three hours per week for at least one year, with many often exceeding this requirement. A hallmark of the program is the thoughtful tutor and student matching process. Partnerships are based on compatible life experiences and shared availability, which ensures student retention and success.

Concurrently, staff recruit and prepare approximately 100 new community volunteers to serve as tutors annually. Individuals participate in a requisite, nine-hour tutor-training workshop, which has evolved into an interactive hybrid course since 2020. Here, tutors learn evidence-based techniques for teaching English and strategies for tutoring remotely, socially distanced, and in person. Tutors report student progress in real-time utilizing a customized mobile app.

- Life Cycle of Students- The program staff conducts an intake interview to identify student goals and administer an English proficiency assessment to determine the student’s reading, writing, and conversational skills. Once a tutor is identified, the student and the tutor attend a Match Meeting with program staff. Students attend 2- 90 minute tutoring sessions per week. After 70 hours of English instruction, the student is reassessed to determine progress. The results of the testing are shared with the student and the tutor. On average most students are with VEP for 2.5-3 years.
- Life Cycle of Tutors- Tutors attend 9-hours of requisite training provided by the program staff. Once a student is identified, the tutor and student attend a Match Meeting with program staff. Tutors prepare lessons for students using resources provided by VEP and from their own life experiences. Throughout the year tutors are invited to attend tutor meetups and peer-to-peer sessions on topics of interest. An annual Tutor Summit provides a day of networking and professional development. Tutors are asked to commit to tutoring their students for 3 hours a week for a minimum of a year.

### **•Specific needs & issues to be addressed**

During the past five years, the demand for an available VEP tutor has remained high with an average of 196 people annually waiting for a tutor or on call for an assessment interview. Adult learners often wait upwards of 12 months to begin 1:1 language, cultural, and citizenship instruction. For regional immigrants who must balance work and family demands, VEP’s accessible and affordable model is often the best option, if not the only source of support. For VEP to be available in every community, we must expand efforts to recruit and train tutors to meet the surge of student requests.

### **•Why it is important to fund this now**

In recent decades, the foreign-born component of the American population has grown to near-historic levels, with immigrants contributing significant impacts on our society in technology, higher education, economic growth, sports and entertainment, and cultural diversity. But for some newcomers, the English language challenges necessary for adapting to, and assimilating into the main currents of American society have stifled their potential for success. Exclusion by language has often hindered the full range of the initiative and courage that it took to leave the familiar surroundings of a home country to make the journey to establish a new life in the U.S. Isolated sub-communities represent lost opportunities for both the people within them as well as for the dominant group that has little access to the range of productive talents and resources among the newcomers.

The Volunteer English Program is a unique approach to outreach and inclusion that is simply unmatched in the four suburban counties of the metro Philadelphia region. Chester County is relatively far from the urban core of Philadelphia where large numbers of immigrants have historically settled. Large cities have tended to offer more ongoing services and experiences to newcomers as part of urban public policy in terms of public education, law enforcement, public health, transit and communications/media. Perhaps in the future, similar programs applying the sound concepts of VEP will be replicated and offered in a variety of our regional communities, but for the moment VEP is one of a kind and worthy of close inspection.

At first glance, the value of strengthening English language skills for individual program participants may border on the obvious. But upon reflection and analysis, VEP program outcomes have more complex impacts that function on multiple levels.

Individual level:

- decrease in general social isolation because of language
- improved access to healthcare for individuals and children
- improved ability to support education of children/family members
- improved potential for work advancement and economic gain

Local/community level:

- expanded ability to participate in social, political, and/or business activities
- facilitates deeper assimilation into American mainstream activities in the community
- weakening of cultural barriers and perception of isolation or estrangement
- local communities are enriched by the contribution of new and diverse experiences and viewpoints.

Regional/National /Global level:

- increase in human capital for economic growth and development in Chester County
- a program that offers unique services in our outlying metropolitan area distant from services usually offered in the urban core
- cultivation of possible links to international communities for business, travel, education, and communication
- enhanced probability of improved multicultural acceptance within American society during a period of widespread polarization

#### •How impact & results will be demonstrated

VEP has several processes in place to measure the success of the intended outcomes. Student assessment takes place at entry into the program, after every 70 hours of tutor instruction, and upon exit from the program.

1. *Assessments:* To track education gains, the CASAS series is used to assess English proficiency levels. In addition to the CASAS testing, VEP also conducts a comprehensive scope of service assessment at the defined intervals. The scope of service assesses reading, writing, pronunciation, comprehension, and speaking skills, which helps staff determine appropriately leveled learning materials.
2. *Surveys:* VEP staff administer Functional Gains Surveys to students after 70 hours of instruction. Students share the broader impact that learning English has had on their lives, which cannot be captured from standardized assessments.
3. *Tutor Portal Data Management System:* To correlate student progress to time and effort, tutors record instructional hours, feedback about learning materials, and advancement towards student-selected goals in real time.

#### •Closing Statement

As an organization, we derive 100% of our operational funding through philanthropic efforts so that we may, without reservation, serve the individuals who most urgently need English language and cultural services. Our immigrant neighbors bring forth a host of talent, skills, and traditions that increase cultural awareness and help us, as Americans, build social justice that will last for years to come.