

## *tips for working with people of*

# EASTERN EUROPEAN DESCENT

*Most Eastern Europeans in this area arrived as refugees, seeking financial security and stability, safety from wars, and a new start in a “pro-diversity” U.S. There are over 3000 refugees from Southeastern Europe living in Guilford County.*

### OVERVIEW

- Personal backgrounds vary greatly with Eastern Europeans, as with any population.
  - The majority of Eastern Europeans (especially Russians) in Guilford County are educated and come from a city, but don't assume this to be the case.
  - Some minority groups from Eastern Europe may be from a village and/or may not have completed an elementary education.
- Religion is a very personal matter to most people of Eastern European descent. It is best not to ask a person's religion unless you know the family well.
  - Many people are here as a direct result of religious persecution (especially people from former Yugoslavia and former USSR).
- Be conscious of not assuming a person's nationality.
  - There are now many different countries in Eastern Europe. Do not be afraid to ask where someone is from – let him or her determine how he or she would prefer to be identified. For example, some prefer to be identified as Yugoslavian instead of Bosnian, or Serbian or Croatian. If someone speaks Russian, they may actually be Ukrainian.
- Ethnicity is also a sensitive issue. Again, do not make assumptions, and allow people to identify themselves.
  - Someone from the former Yugoslavia may be from the dominant population and speak Serbo-Croatian, or they may be Kosovar and speak Albanian.

### LANGUAGE & COMMUNICATION

- One-on-one communication with someone of Eastern European descent can be uncomfortable for someone unfamiliar with the culture. Many Eastern Europeans speak English, but not all are fluent. If necessary, use basic English and speak slowly, but don't assume there is no English ability.
  - Direct communication is highly valued. Eastern Europeans do not place emphasis on subtlety or sensitivity.
  - Handshaking is acceptable, but be careful with Muslim women.
  - Smile and keep a friendly attitude.
  - Greet people with “good morning,” “good afternoon,” or “good evening.” “Good-bye” or “good luck.”
  - Within the same religious community, people will greet one another with religious phrases.

- There are no cultural barriers, like prejudice or family preference, for accessing formal supports. The greatest barrier is language and misinformation or lack of information.
- Emotions are not shown much in public. People from Eastern Europe may argue if they think a situation is unfair.
- Networking is an important part of Eastern European culture. When meeting a family, establishing a mutual acquaintance will immediately put the family at ease and will encourage them to trust you.
  - Word of mouth from someone within the community about a childcare center or medical practice is the most effective way to recruit new families.
  - Coercion has been a way of survival in Eastern Europe. Adults have learned that the way to meet needs is through perseverance and exerting pressure on anyone who is considered in disagreement.
- Incorporate cultural activities in daily activities to make all people feel recognized.
  - Generally, age is the main factor for determining people's customs and habits. Elderly are more conservative and traditionally oriented, while younger generations are modern and try to be "in trend."

## **FAMILY**

- The husband is usually considered the head of the household and, traditionally, the wife takes the husband's last name after marriage. In less developed areas (country and non-urban) a woman has fewer rights than a man. This is also true for traditional cultures and some religions, like those in Kosovo (Albanian) and Bosnak (Muslim). Younger generations and urban citizens differ from the traditional norms, and partners have equal relationships in the household.
- Some youth are taking up leadership roles. There are some cases where kids are getting out of control.
- Children are very protected. They are raised with love, and they usually live a very long time with their parents – often even after they start college.
  - Discipline and good manners are very important in Eastern European cultures. If children do not listen to their parents they will be punished.

## **HEALTH CARE**

- Parents or elderly are the first to be asked for advice. South Eastern European people prefer to treat illnesses naturally, using herbal medicine, and/or with "spiritual healers". Alternative medicine and ritual healing is highly regarded and frequently practiced. Eastern Europeans are very superstitious.
- Mental illness is considered shameful. Mentally ill people are often targeted as crazy, with no hope of being completely healthy again. Mental illness is often believed to be caused by "spells" and "black magic". Mental illness is treated both spiritually and/or medically.
- Physical illness is considered normal and people ask for conventional medical treatment and go to a doctor.

## OTHER TIPS

- Alcohol is acceptable and is given as a gesture of hospitality.
- Over 50% of the community smokes.
- There is no incidence of drug abuse.
- Most people like to play soccer when time permits.
- Typically Eastern Europeans do not like American food. Their food is spicy and most meals include meat.

