

## In Their Shoes

*Knowing the immigrant experience makes SMPs better able to serve*

Editor's Note: *For more than 20 years, Vicki Weld has supervised building projects, advocacy projects and training and service delivery projects, mostly abroad. With a relief and development background, she served for many years as a disaster response coordinator, most recently with Medical Teams International, in a variety of cultures in places such as Afghanistan, Kosovo, Sri Lanka and India.*

By Vicki Weld

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**A**cculturation occurs any time people take on behaviors, viewpoints or values after interfacing with others from a different country or regions of the same country that they either wouldn't have taken on in their culture of birth or wouldn't have adopted as deeply.

For instance, here in the States, we are generally known as a time-oriented culture. We schedule our events so that they don't overlap yet we also maintain some flexibility. When I lived in Germany, however, where the time orientation is even stronger, I had to increase my time orientation to participate in community life. There wasn't as much flexibility as I was used to in the United States.

Conversely, when I lived in the South Pacific, we were on "island time." Events occurred once everyone showed up. Weddings, birthdays and other occasions regularly started 3 hours later than planned. I would show up on time just in case but would always carry something to occupy myself un-

til the fun truly began. I wasn't going to change anything by stressing over something beyond my control. I adapted. That's acculturation.

Immigrant populations can be difficult to reach not because they refuse to assimilate, but because assimilation into a new culture is just plain hard. Anthropologist Marv Mayers, PhD, asserts that it takes a minimum of 8 years for an individual to fully assimilate into a different culture, and that's only if the person is completely immersed, spending significant amounts of time outside of his or her cultural enclave.

Put yourself in the shoes of a new immigrant. In your birth country, you are a fully functioning adult, possibly also a well-respected community leader. Then you come to a new country, only to find yourself relegated to the same status as a child. All your years of training, your civic reputation, your previous skills useless. To navigate your life you must rely on the kindness of strangers and hope that you can either speak enough language to cover basics or your skills in pantomime shoot up exponentially.

You find every nerve rubbed raw. You try to carry your pack of frustrations in a gracious manner only to be undone by something as simple as trying to switch on a light. (Did you know that it's not a universal principal that UP = ON for light switches? Ever know anyone who has ever cried about it? You do now.)

Many immigrants do not fully acculturate, often due to adverse experiences suffered within their adopted country. In addition, they may receive a



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“Learn English!” command from the host country, sparking fear and humiliation that can paralyze them.

There are four distinct mile markers along the acculturation highway – signposts that break up the journey, inform us of our progress and signal that one is close to arrival. These come from Kalervo Oberg, PhD.

### **Honeymoon Phase**

This is the exciting period where the sights, sounds, tastes and smells of the new culture bring a rush of fascination to the individual. New observations and discoveries abound.

### **Negotiation Phase**

Cultural differences begin to dampen that honeymoon glow. Things don't seem so fascinating, just irritating. Immigrants don't know why they feel so out of sorts – so frustrated, so angry. Focus centers on behaviors, particularly those deemed intolerable. Tension builds and even minor incidents seem major. Depression often occurs.

This is the phase where many immigrants stop making progress on their journey. The negativity they feel from the culture and fear they feel within drive them to tunnel under and set up their own little culture within a culture. Rejection is their mechanism for coping. They stop negotiating with the host culture because they feel so hopeless.

### **Adjustment Phase**

Those who keep moving forward do eventually

make it to a place where they establish routines and garner enough linguistic skills to feel more in control of their lives. Things begin to normalize and problem-solving skills emerge. The culture starts to make sense and the values beneath the surface of behavior are more evident. Acceptance begins.

### **Mastery Phase**

Also known as biculturalism, this phase begins when immigrants behave, think and feel like those in their host countries. They feel as at home in their adopted culture as in their culture of origin, regardless of whether or not they decide to maintain certain values or actions from their mother country. Upon re-entry to one's mother country, a bicultural person actually feels homesick for the adopted culture (reverse culture shock).

The mastery phase alone is not acculturation. Acculturation is the process that's been occurring throughout each phase.

### **How does that relate to SMP work?**

SMP and SHIP/SHIBA folks have heart. They show compassion for seniors and society's most vulnerable. That compassion is needed with hard-to-reach populations. Imagine how disheartened and isolated people in culture shock feel. Often, they have no idea why they feel so terrible or why the bottom dropped out of their world. If they are of refugee status, they may also have a disability or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

I have a dear friend whose PTSD marred her first few years here in the United States. Every time she heard a helicopter, Marg couldn't help but take

cover. Marg had lived and worked on the Thai-Cambodian border. She knew the terror of Pol Pot's regime and the spray of gunfire from a random helicopter. It took time for her to feel safe in her own body, let alone a new country.

My purpose in sharing all this is simply to remind us what we already know: to reach out with empathy and humility, to try to place ourselves in the shoes of another and realize that as we combat fraud, we can encourage people to continue in their journeys of acculturation. The more positive interface immigrants have with their adopted countrymen and women, the more encouraged they are to step outside their comfort zones. The more positive

interfaces they have with representatives of their adopted government (like those who serve with SMP), the more open and transparent they become. We actually can do quite a lot more than empower seniors with tools to shield them from fraud and abuse. We can empower immigrant seniors to step out into the lifeblood of their communities simply by being kind.

Though it takes more effort and creativity on our part, outreach to the numerous communities of immigrants is also an opportunity to be a bridge – not only to knowing Medicare, but also a bridge for some of these folks to finally come home. ●