



**GETTING A BROADER PICTURE** The Volunteer Center of Bergen County is launching its Bergen LEADS program to recruit a more diverse cross-section of community leaders that will lead the growing county into the next generation. Key LEADS organizers include: (front row) Janet Sharma, executive director, Volunteer Center of Bergen County; Alan Levine, Cole Schotz, Meisel, Forman & Leonard; Amanda Missey, director of training and business services, Volunteer Center of Bergen County; Lynne Alt-grant, nonprofit management consultant; and Dr. G. Jeremiah Ryan, president, Bergen Community College. (Back row) Richard Segall, assistant superintendent, Englewood Public Schools; David Warshaw, VISTAS Management Solutions, member, Volunteer Center of Bergen County, and chair, Bergen LEADS Advisory Panel; Tom Toronto, CEO, Bergen County's United Way; Ellen Jacobs, board member, National Council of Jewish Women, Children's Aid and Family Services, and Youth Consultation Service; Frank Scandale, editor, *The Record*; Hector Banegas, Wachovia Wealth Management; David Yanagisawa, TD Banknorth; and William "Pat" Schuber, former Bergen County Executive and senior lecturer, Fairleigh Dickinson University. Not Pictured: Debbie Aronson, VC Board member; Rev. Wanda Lundy, Church on the Edge; Dr. Peter Mercer, president, Ramapo College; Norman Seiden, philanthropist; Susan Russ, Reader's Digest Assoc.; John R. Smith, PSE&G.

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# Leading Questions

A new Volunteer Center program will address Bergen's diverse issues

BY MEGAN MANNI  
Photo by Ted Axelrod

The most populous county in New Jersey, Bergen is home to a startling array of ethnicities and socioeconomic strata. And as host to nearly a million of the state's 8.7 million residents, according to the latest U.S. Census figures, the county faces ever-present challenges. But for community leaders unsure of how best to address these challenges, the Volunteer Center of Bergen County is spearheading a program to do just that.

Each school year beginning this September, the program, "Bergen LEADS," will hold monthly seminars for leaders of local government agencies, faith-based organizations and other nonprofits, and minority groups, as well as the private sector. This targeted audience comprises concerned citizens who want to learn more about the most pressing issues facing Bergen, and how to handle them, says Janet Sharma, executive director of the Volunteer Center and a member of the advisory panel launching LEADS.

"What resonated with the members of our advisory panel was, 'Where is the next generation of leaders going to come from?'" says Sharma, who notes that philanthropy groups like the Elks, Knights of Columbus and Rotary Club are having trouble recruiting new members. "Everyone works so hard, they don't have the time," she adds.

With Bergen's phenomenal growth, there are increasing burdens on infrastructure, the environment, schools, employment and housing. In a county with more than 53,000 veterans, 251,000 foreign-born residents and 88,000 disabled citizens – the last comprising 10 percent of Bergen's total population – the moral and governmental obligation to help these residents is a constant priority. Providing immigrant communities a greater voice and adjusting traffic patterns for the mushrooming population are just two examples of LEADS' goals, Sharma points out. Through the program, participants will be able to contribute their own professional and personal perspective to assess the best solutions for such problems.

The monthly seminars will also include forays into the field, so participants can experience firsthand the realities of a Bergen they may rarely encounter. "During the day, teams will go out into the streets, so they can see the poorer school districts, the Meadowlands, a charter school," Sharma explains. The chair of LEADS'

unique in the state in terms of its size and diversity – diversity that many of us who live here don't recognize, and don't live every day," says David Warshaw, a county resident for 14 years. Field trips will begin and end at Bergen Community College (BCC), a key sponsor of the program. Dr. G. Jeremiah Ryan, BCC president, notes that in 2004, he took part in Leadership New Jersey, a statewide nonprofit program that will in some ways serve as a model for LEADS. "[It] was one of the single best educational experiences of my life," says Ryan, who is also a LEADS advisory panel member. "I'm a real supporter of programs that identify leaders and potential leaders, and that give them a chance to learn about their communities. We [at BCC] are a countywide organization, and this program takes a look at the potential of Bergen as a county, as opposed to an amalgam of towns."

*"LEADS' aim is to bring emerging leaders together so they can see beyond their own organizations, and see how by working together, we can solve some of Bergen's issues."*

DAVID WARSHAW, CHAIR,  
BERGEN LEADS ADVISORY PANEL

The editor of *The Record* for the past seven years, Frank Scandale, contributed his own bird's-eye perspective to the program's curriculum committee. "Bergen LEADS is looking to develop leaders in the new world – not the traditional historic pockets of where leaders might come from in the county," he says. "There are emerging communities like the Koreans, the Arab-Americans, the Latinos and the Filipinos, that are becoming the blanket of Bergen County."

Each year's LEADS class will be split into six teams, each tackling a different project over the course of the seminar year. Projects will be selected from among suggestions – following a request for proposals – by community, faith-based and grassroots organizations, notes Amanda Missey of the

teams will present their results – whether a marketing plan for an existing nonprofit, a start-up plan for a new organization, a plan to overcome a specific challenge or simply a feasibility study. The completed projects, Missey hopes, will spur the newly minted alumni to act on their ideas, or become involved in other community service.

LEADS organizers even hope to develop an alumni network, so that people who have been through the seminars can advise future participants on how to apply the lessons they learn. Of course, participants will doubtless advise one another even before they graduate – and that's encouraged. "Each will come with their own network of people they know professionally or through their communities," says Warshaw, who has also participated in Leadership New Jersey (LNJ), and is a current member of the Governor's Advisory Council on Volunteerism and Community Service. As Sharma adds: "It can be a nucleus of leaders in the community."

Case in point: Missey, herself an LNJ graduate, was put in touch with Hector Banegas, senior vice president with Wachovia Wealth Management, through a fellow LNJ alum. She recruited Banegas to sit on the advisory panel; now, both he and Wachovia as a whole are playing an integral part in LEADS development and fund-raising. The benefits for locally based corporations are twofold: the chance to take part in bettering their immediate area, and to put their business' name "out there." "It makes a lot of business sense for us to have an organization focused on leadership, to be able to create a pipeline of future leaders," Banegas says. "It also gives us a broad visibility in the marketplace, and an opportunity to be involved in something that is unique to Bergen County."

Corporations often have departments dedicated to social responsibility, LEADS coordinators point out, but their staffs may not have the chance to become totally immersed in their local environment. Ultimately, businesses whose leaders sign up for LEADS should be able to truly get to know their customers and see firsthand their everyday challenges – which may lead to better communication and better service.

With a panel and a curriculum that seeks to echo Bergen's diversity, LEADS is demonstrating organizers' commitment to residents' overall welfare. "We're in such a prosperous area, but not everybody is doing that well," Scandale adds. "I think a leader has to make that problem go away. You can't tackle the whole world," he allows.