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## BROOKLYN CAMPUS

### Refugees reengineer job skills

By JOYCE SHELBY

DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

The computer classroom at the American Training Center in Forest Hills, Queens, was crammed Tuesday afternoon with eager students, many of them engineers from the former Soviet Union.

They were learning to use computers for design and 3-D modeling, and, in the process, making themselves more marketable in the U.S.

"This is the additional knowledge I need," said Leonid Kogan, 45, of Midwood, Brooklyn. The electrical engineer arrived a year ago as a refugee from Odessa, Ukraine.

In Odessa, he worked with pens and pencils.

"There were no computers," he said.

Kogan's studies are being paid for by the Jewish Community Council of Greater Coney Island.

"If we can't 'Americanize' skills, it means lower-paying jobs for the refugees," Rivkah Berman, director of vocational services at the council, explained.

Kogan said when he, his wife and son arrived last year, he was advised to get a license and drive for a limousine service.

"I was told, 'Work for cash,'" he recalled. But Polina Royzman, program manager at the training center, encouraged him to learn to use computers so he could continue his professional work.



Roca NEWS

**Rivkah Berman, director of vocation services at Jewish Community Council of Greater Coney Island, at American Training Center in Queens.**

Kogan also took English-as-a-Second-Language classes at the center and within three months, he was employed.

"Hundreds of our clients have benefited and become self-sufficient," said Rabbi Moshe Weiner, executive director of the Jewish Community Council. The council also sponsors short-term training for people to learn computerized bookkeeping and medical records keeping or to become home health attendants.

A few weeks ago, downsizing put Kogan back in the job market. He went back to the training center and expects to have another job shortly.

But other refugees have not been so lucky, Weiner said. Some who lost jobs after Sept. 11 have had difficulty finding work since. Agencies like the Jewish Community Council cannot help because the refugees have been here longer than five years and are past the time they would be eligible for resettlement assistance.

Also, Weiner said, the council itself has lost funding. In the last fiscal year, the money it gets from government sources was cut \$1.2 million. That translated into less vocational training, employment counseling and job placement, Weiner said.

The agency served 506 people, many of them Russian-speaking, in fiscal year 2003. This fiscal year, there are 114 clients.

"Many of the people who came to us were professionals," the rabbi said. "Now they are on the welfare rolls. Yet, they are so capable of being successful if they could only upgrade their skills."

Kogan said retraining people makes sound economic sense.

"The training costs money, but in three months, I'm a taxpayer with a good salary," he said. "It's a good return on an investment."

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