

Consuls Discuss Caribbean

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About 400 Floridians from Caribbean nations turned out Saturday to discuss local concerns with their countries' Florida-based diplomats.

Most of the more than two-hour meeting at St. Paul's Presbyterian Church in Ocoee was spent listening to reports from nine consuls general.

The audience heard about devastating hurricane damage in Grenada in September that left two-thirds of the country's 100,000 people displaced, extensive flooding in Guyana and allusions to Haiti's political unrest.

Bahamas Consul Alma Adams addressed a key issue for Caribbean nationals: how they are treated by U.S. law enforcement.

She also appealed to Bahamians to obey the law.

"Remember, any time any of our children or [adult] nationals commits a crime, it's the same as taking our flag and shredding it," Adams said.

Organizers said they expected questions about arrests and deportations, immigration snags, problems affecting immigrant children in school and the lack of availability of drivers licenses for undocumented aliens.

But fewer than 20 people questioned the diplomats, and only a handful addressed those issues.

"I'm here to listen and find out what your concerns are and how to address them," Grenada Consul Richard Nixon told the audience.

He was among consuls from the Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Jamaica, St. Lucia, Suriname, Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago who attended the meeting, sponsored by the Caribbean Consular Corps of Florida and the Conference of Heads of Caribbean Organizations of Central Florida.

The latter is an informal group of 20 Caribbean organizations in the area.

Gail Seeram, a Guyanese immigration attorney in Orlando and New York, asked the consuls for help with an expired immigration law that used to allow undocumented immigrants to apply for citizenship if they had a sponsor. That law expired four years ago, she said.

She also asked consuls to notify Florida residents renewing their immigration documents year after year that they are eligible to apply for citizenship -- the remedy for deportation.

She didn't get the answer she wanted.

"As [government] officers, we cannot officially endorse persons seeking citizenship elsewhere," Jamaican Consul Ricardo Allicock said.

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