

City should be open with info

IT WAS AROUND 6:30 p.m. and the modest lobby of Queens' Dominican American Society was bustling with people. At least 40 neighborhood residents were trying to register for free English classes.

"This is *una gran oportunidad*," says María Herrera, a Mexican restaurant worker in her 30s, and a Corona resident. "Without learning English, you cannot get anywhere in this country."

Inside, a group of 15 people of many ages sitting in a spare classroom intently repeated after a teacher: "Juanito is going to school. He is already learning to speak English."

Not one penny has been spent in luxury offices or fancy accommodations in the building, located at 35-49 98th St. in Corona. Obviously, this is an organization that, for seven years, has been doing something right — and the neighborhood people know it.

"People are hungry for these classes," says society President Carlos Suárez, a Dominican immigrant who works for the state Department of Labor. "They desperately want to learn English."

Until two months ago, when its budget was sharply reduced, the society used to help many more people and was able to offer more than English classes. But in June, the city's Department of Youth and Community Development decided to give the organization \$38,000 instead of the \$270,748 it had requested. The society had received more than \$400,000 in funding over the past three years.

Immigrants of many nationalities could also get computer training, citizenship and GED preparation. More than 1,000 people benefited from such services every month.

The reason for the slashing of funds, says a youth department letter to Suárez, is that money is allocated through a competitive process and the society did not make the cut. "... Your agency's most recent proposal ... was not ranked highest this time around," the letter read, "and the contract was awarded to another [community-based organization] in your area."

But youth department officials, who say they made their decision following the recommendations of Neighborhood Advisory Boards 3 and 4, would not reveal the name of the chosen organizations — actually there are 10 — until the department's commissioner, Jerry Cammarata, called us on Friday.

What this means, of course, is that for the past two months, if there was another agency providing the services the Dominican American Society was forced to suspend, no one knew about it — and consequently the community was deprived of those services.

"We had not revealed the names before because they were not registered yet with the controller's office," Cammarata said on Friday. "But beginning on Monday, we will make sure all community boards have this information."

But the fact is that in the past, getting information out of the Youth and Community Development Department has been harder than finding a cheap apartment in New York City.

When state Sen. Toby Ann Stavisky (D-Flushing) tried

to find out how the department decided what community organizations should be funded, she had to invoke the Freedom of Information Law. An ordinary citizen, of course, would never be able to break the barrier of secrecy.

"Some of my constituents were concerned, and I am trying to address those concerns," Stavisky says. "In order to do that, I need to know how [the Youth and Community Development Department] goes about making a selection."

Last Monday, Stavisky wrote a letter to Cammarata, which read in part: "Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Law and as an elected public official representing Community Boards 3 and 4, I would like copies of the proposals submitted by all applicants and the evaluations of these proposals by your office and the neighborhood advisory boards."

She also asked for names and addresses of those serving on the neighborhood advisory boards and a copy of the minutes of their meetings. There has been no answer until now.

This, of course, is not and should not be privileged information. But these are Mayor Giuliani's times, and city government has become a secret society of sorts.

NEVERTHELESS, ON FRIDAY, Cammarata declared himself available any time information was needed. "We all learn from each other," he said.

If that is the case, it would certainly be a welcome change.

