Dreams of Citizenship Out of Reach for Many Asians

Guong Liang Zhu first visited the Chinese Newcomers Service Center shortly after moving to the United States from Hong Kong in 1991. A monolingual Cantonese speaker, Zhu turned to the center to help him translate documents like bank statements and phone and electricity bills.

Like tens of thousands of other Chinese immigrants, Zhu gradually became comfortable at the center, located at the edge of San Francisco's Chinatown a few blocks from Stockton Street's bustling produce markets, bakeries, and restaurants. Encouraged by the friendly bilingual staff, he decided to enroll in the center's English as a Second Language and citizenship classes this year.

The retired barber beams as he talks about the prospect of becoming an American citizen. "I'd really love to be a citizen because I want to vote," says the 65-year-old Zhu. "I would like to give my vote to someone I have confidence in, and that I like, for presidential candidate. I want my vote to go to the right person."

Zhu says he hopes the classes, which are free for low-income residents, will continue "because I want newcomers to benefit. There are a lot of people thinking of becoming citizens, so this class is very important."

The center also helped 81-year-old grandfather Yew Wah Lai, an immigrant from Hong Kong, become a citizen in 2000. "I feel more secure," Lai says. "Since you live in America, you should be a citizen." Lai says.

But two years after California's Community Services & Development department eliminated funds that helped local governments and nonprofits pay for naturalization programs, the Chinese Newcomers Service Center is struggling to offer the classes, says Executive Director Julia Ling. For now, she's dipping into the center's reserves. A second program, which helps immigrants fill out citizenship applications was free, but will now charge $40 until it finds new funding.

Mental Health Counseling – a Lifeline

In her nightmares, Ny is back in Cambodia where her two children, husband, brother, and sister were killed. She is being tortured and forced to perform hard labor, carrying soil to build bridges and irrigation systems.

Ny lives in San Jose, Calif. now, but the horror she experienced under the brutal Khmer Rouge regime has followed her, making her depressed and fearful even as she struggles to adjust to life in America. She found some relief when she began counseling sessions with behavioral health counselor Siath Hen, himself a Cambodian refugee, at Asian Americans for Community Involvement (AACI). Without the agency's assistance, "I don't know where I could go, and my life might be ended," says the 54-year-old Ny. "The language, the culture is very different. I could not go anywhere."

The nonprofit also helps Vietnamese clients bridge a generational gap between immigrant parents and their American-born children, Filipino youth cope with depression and family conflicts, and Taiwanese face the challenges of acculturation and 'satellite parenting,' in which at least one parent travels between business and family commitments in California and Taiwan. In the East Bay, Asian Pacific Psychological Services has joined the Southeast Asian Youth Task Force in western Contra Costa County to relieve gang-related violence and tensions among Khmu, Mien, Lao, Vietnamese, and Samoan youth.

Working in a smaller Asian ethnic community, Cambodian Community Development, Inc., had to combine resources with the Jewish Family Services Agency of the East Bay to provide counseling to clients. One of their Cambodian clients, Phay, left a Thai refugee camp in 1982 with her eight children. It was an attempt to leave the painful memories of the Khmer Rouge far behind. As the years passed, her children seemed to be adjusting and doing okay, but the adjustment proved too hard for her two youngest sons; both have had trouble with the law.

Editor's Note

Information about Asian Americans is often not included in mainstream reports, partly explained by the fact that, although we are 24% of the Bay Area population, we are still only 4% of the U.S. population. Even without a lot of data, it is informative to take a closer look at people and communities. Here we report on two issues that now have great importance to Asians: immigration services and mental health care.
Mental Health Counseling – a Lifeline

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As Phay watched her two sons spiral downwards, she started having hallucinations. She sought help from CCDI and was diagnosed with major depression. Her counselor realized that Phay also suffered from several medical problems including diabetes and poor eyesight. Her depression is made worse by her inability to help her sons. She cannot provide housing for one of her unemployed sons because his bad credit rating would jeopardize her government housing. He must rely on friends or retreat to the park on bad days. Another son got in with the wrong crowd and was arrested for drug dealing and use.

Phay continues to get treatment and medication through CCDI, and she relieves her pain through the stories she shares during her counseling sessions.

When it comes to mental health in Asian communities, there is no one-size-fits-all approach or treatment. Instead, much depends on an immigrant’s background and history. But even as they try to meet clients’ diverse needs, agencies are increasingly coping with uncertain funding prospects. AACI, for instance, risks losing about $500,000 in funding from Santa Clara County this fiscal year, says program Manager Jorge Wong.

At Asian Community Mental Health Services, funding cuts mean the agency turns away about 60 referrals a year. Just five years ago, it accepted all cases, says Director of Operations Sharron Sue.

One of the most basic hurdles nonprofits face is convincing people that mental illness exists in Asian communities. ‘There’s this myth out there that, ‘Oh well, you’re Asian, you’re not going to need any help. You’re all superstars, you’re all rich, you’re all wealthy business owners,’” says Alisa Tantraphol, AACI’s former Manager. ‘That’s something that AACI has been fighting for the last three decades, trying to tell people that yes, there is a certain segment of the population that fits that stereotype, but there are also a lot of people who are more severely disadvantaged – not only in terms of socioeconomic status, but in terms of their ability to get services.’

In Eastern cultures, mental illness carries with it a greater stigma than in Western ones, Wong says. Many families feel shame, believing that someone who is mentally ill wasn’t raised properly, or has bad karma or genes. ‘Given the immigrant mentality – go and prove yourself through hard work – mental illness is often perceived as laziness, lack of motivation … something that can be just pushed aside, abandoned, and just move on,’ Wong says. ‘By the time that someone notices the symptoms of mental illness, that person has deteriorated so far down the road that it may take much longer to stabilize him or her.’ His agency often works to stabilize clients with medication and psychotherapy and helps them find jobs, housing, and social support.

Agencies say that with appropriate treatment, many mentally ill clients are more capable of caring for their families and functioning in their jobs and everyday life.

Many don’t recognize their mental illnesses; instead they complain of headaches, stomach aches or other physical ailments. Others employ Eastern explanations – their yin and yang are out of balance, for example – or turn to remedies such as acupuncture, herbal tea or shamans (spiritual priests) to help them connect with ancestral spirits. Culturally sensitive doctors recognize these practices and integrate them into discussions with patients.

Counselors also work to build trust, sometimes in innovative ways tailored to the populations they serve. At Asian Community Mental Health Services, for example, a group of mentally ill Mien women work on a needlework project, helping them form bonds and learn to trust others.

One of the most vulnerable groups is youth struggling to navigate between their immigrant parents’ traditional values and the Westernized culture in America. Asian Community Mental Health Services works to empower youth who are suffering psychological stress – low academic performers or truants who may be involved with gangs. ‘We have them in groups where they talk about themselves,’ says Executive Director Betty Hong. ‘They feel like, ‘Wow, I’m not the only one having this problem.’ It’s all about letting them have a safe place to come to.’

For Asian Pacific Psychological Services workers, gangs and violence hit close to home last year when 15-year-old Chan Boonkeut, the daughter of a staff member, was shot through the front door of her Richmond, Calif. home. The gunfire, which killed...

Counseling Can Be Hard to Find

Nearly 1 out of 2 Asian American and Pacific Islanders will have difficulty accessing mental health treatment because they do not speak English or cannot find services that meet their language needs. Of the mental health care professionals who were practicing in the late 1990s, approximately 70 Asian American providers were available for every 100,000 Asian Americans in the United States; this is about half the ratio for whites (Manderscheid & Henderson, 1998).


http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cre/default.asp
Boonkeut, was apparently intended for her older brother, police said. During home visits, counselors see some of the pressures parents and children face. 'A lot of parents are working multiple jobs so they're not there for the kids,' says Executive Director Beatrice Lee. 'Many of these kids hang out in the street,' possibly getting mixed up with gangs or criminal activity. With parents, 'we see a lot of disconnect, a sense of helplessness that they're not able to be in charge,' Lee says. 'Some of them may have been in professional jobs back home and now are doing more labor types of work.' Community-based nonprofits provide an affordable option for low-income immigrants who cannot afford the $100 to $150 per hour that many private psychologists charge. The agencies also supply counselors who speak clients' languages and understand their cultures. AACI, for example, provides services in an array of languages: Mandarin, Cantonese, Toishanese, Fukienese, Taiwanese, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao, Lao Mien, Thai, Korean, Tagalog, Ilocano, Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Spanish, and English. But more than sharing the same tongue, counselors possess a passion for their work that comes from deep within. Many experienced the same traumas as their clients. 'For a lot of us, too, here, you go to school and you come back to a nonprofit and people say, 'Why do you come back to a nonprofit?' It's not for the money, for one thing,' Wong says. 'A lot comes from the heart, it's reciprocity, working to give back to an organization that has given so much to everybody else.'

Dreams of Citizenship Out of Reach for Many Asians

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Across the Bay Area, agencies that help immigrants become citizens are feeling the pinch of state budget cuts and smaller grants from foundations, just at a time when more people are seeking to become citizens – a desire fueled by increased scrutiny of immigrants after the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. After 9/11, some clients feel 'the climate for immigrants is not so good (and) they're feeling that they want to apply now,' says Richard Konda, Executive Director of the Asian Law Alliance.

After the attacks, requests for assistance with citizenship applications surged by about 20 to 25 percent. But without the State funding or increases in donations from individuals, the Alliance has been forced to narrow its services to the very, very low income, elderly, and disabled, Konda says. About three years ago, it served three times as many clients.

Civic participation is also a cornerstone of the Korean Community Center of the East Bay’s services. The Center helps register voters, translate voter education material and is working to increase voter turnout among Asian Americans, a group Executive Director Hun Kim sees as 'a sleeping dragon.'

'We want to get a bunch of Koreans out to the polls on local issues that benefit the Asian American and broader immigrant population. We want to be able to really explain those issues clearly so that they can make an informed decision,' Kim says. 'Ultimately, the goal is that the Asian Pacific American community can gain some more political weight.'

Asian Law Caucus staff attorney Joren Lyons and others say their agencies fill a critical need for people who want to become citizens or need legal assistance but cannot afford a private attorney. But with state budget cuts, the caucus must 'severely curtail our naturalization services,' says Phil Ting, the Caucus’s Executive Director.

Susan Rader, a litigation secretary who found herself in the unusual - and uncomfortable - position of being unable to prove her legal status, is one of its grateful clients. Years ago, her purse was snatched and along with it, her California ID. Later, she lost her green card. Rader, who was born on Clark Air Base in the Philippines, contacted U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services in an effort to replace her green card, only to find they had no record of her. She couldn’t

Doing More Damage than Good

Nonprofit agencies serving the Asian community provide a trustworthy alternative to a growing number of unscrupulous immigration brokers who take advantage of the complex green card process in order to exploit immigrants.

In one high-profile case, hundreds of Korean immigrants said they were the innocent victims of a scam perpetrated by a corrupt government official and immigration consultants, according to a January 2003 report in the San Jose Mercury News. The Korean immigrants sought consulting services provided by John Choe, his wife Cheri, and his sister-in-law, Song Ja Byun, a deacon at a Cupertino church many attended. The consultants then bribed Immigration and Naturalization Service supervisor Leland Dwayne Sustaire in exchange for green cards, according to the Mercury News. Sustaire was convicted in federal court for accepting $500,000 in bribes from the consultants over a 12-year period. He received probation and the consultants served jail time ranging from several months to three years, according to the Mercury News. The Korean immigrants, who say they were unaware of the fraud, face removal proceedings next spring, says attorney Alex C. Park, who is representing 150 of them. One immigrant has already been deported and about 17 others have received deportation notices.
afford a private attorney because she’d recently been laid off from her job, in part, she says, because she was unable to provide identification. “I was completely confounded. I needed an advocate and I was unable to pay for a private sector lawyer,” Rader says. Law Caucus attorney Lyons helped her negotiate through the bureaucratic morass and in August she was issued a temporary green card. With proof of her legal status in hand, Rader says she can now begin searching for a new job.

For others, agencies like the Caucus offer a trustworthy, nonprofit alternative to sometimes dishonest consultants who prey on low-income immigrants unfamiliar with America’s complex immigration system. “For monolingual, low-income Bay Area residents, they need access to reliable information about how to resolve their immigration issues, and unfortunately there are a number of unscrupulous people out there who will take advantage of their situation,” Lyons says. “Something the Caucus has always done is to provide accurate information to members of the community in their own language to make sure that they understand what can and can’t be done under the law, and that they’re not paying some of their meager available cash to somebody to do something that absolutely can’t be done.”

Nonprofits serving Asians also bring a particular cultural savviness to immigration cases. Shobha Menon, Executive Director of Narika, which helps South Asian women overcome domestic violence, says one example is how staff members and volunteers — themselves Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi, Nepali, Sri Lankan, Bhutanese, Fijian and Caribbean — understand that the women with a history of domestic violence who call Narika’s help line might also have complex immigration problems. “We understand concepts like arranged marriage — what happens in an arranged marriage, how relations are formed with the family rather than between husband and wife,” Menon says. “There are a lot of cultural issues that come up that sometimes women are loath to talk about with mainstream providers. (Providers) could also be judgmental about the system of arranged marriages, which would be very daunting to a woman.”

Perhaps the most important thing nonprofits do, however, extends beyond any single success story. Staff members at the Caucus are always focused on the bigger picture, looking for ways to challenge trends that adversely affect the larger Asian American community. The Caucus is “not just accepting that this is the status quo,” Ting says, “but really saying that this situation is unjust and that it needs to be changed.”

Could You Pass the Immigration Test?

Nonprofit agencies help naturalization applicants study for a test that requires them to display their understanding of United States government and history. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (formerly the Immigration and Naturalization Service) provides 100 questions to study. But they’re not all a breeze — even longtime citizens may find themselves stumped on a few. Here are a few sample questions:

**QUESTIONS:**

1. How many changes or amendments are there to the Constitution?
2. How many Representatives are there in Congress?
3. For how long do we elect the Representatives?
4. Who becomes president of the U.S.A. if the president and the vice-president should die?
5. Who is the chief justice of the Supreme Court?
6. Can you name the thirteen original states?
7. Who said, ‘Give me liberty or give me death’?
8. According to the Constitution, a person must meet certain requirements in order to be eligible to become president. Name one of these requirements.
9. How many Supreme Court justices are there?
10. In what year was the Constitution written?

**ANSWERS:**

1. Twenty-seven
2. 435
3. 2 years
4. Speaker of the House of Representatives
5. William Rehnquist
7. Patrick Henry
8. Must be a natural born citizen of the United States; must be at least 35 years old by the time he/she will serve; must have lived in the United States for at least 14 years.
9. Nine
10. 1787

More questions and answers may be found on the USCIS Web site at: http://uscis.gov/graphics/services/natz/100q.pdf
Taking Action – Asian Pacific Fund Grants

In 2004 the Asian Pacific Fund distributed grants, scholarships and awards totaling $374,250. Grants to Bay Area organizations from discretionary funds are listed below. The Fund also supported a wide range of grants, scholarships, and awards through restricted and donor advised funds.

Grants for Mental Health Services:

- Asian Americans for Community Involvement (San Jose) -- $20,000
- Asian American Recovery Services (San Francisco & Daly City) -- $20,000
- Asian Community Mental Health Services (Oakland) -- $10,000
- Asian & Pacific Islander Wellness Center (San Francisco) -- $10,000
- Cambodian Community Development, Inc. (Oakland) -- $15,000
- Daly City Youth Health Center (Daly City) -- $10,000

Grants for Immigration and Legal Services:

- Asian Law Alliance (San Jose) -- $15,000
- Asian Law Caucus (San Francisco) -- $15,000
- Korean Community Center of East Bay (Oakland) -- $10,000
- Lao Family Community Development (Oakland) -- $10,000

Grants for Job Training, Domestic Violence, and Senior Services:

- Asian Women’s Shelter (San Francisco) -- $2,000
- Charity Cultural Services Center (San Francisco) -- $10,000
- Chinese for Affirmative Action (San Francisco) -- $15,000
- Filipinos for Affirmative Action (Oakland) -- $10,000
- Maitri (Menlo Park) -- $5,000
- Narika (Berkeley) -- $20,000
- Shimituh/Korean Community Center of the East Bay (Oakland) -- $2,000
- Yu-Ai Kai/Japanese American Community Senior Service (San Jose) -- $15,000

Grants to support the Arts:

- Asian Pacific Islander Cultural Center (San Francisco) -- $12,500
- Kearny Street Workshop (San Francisco) -- $12,500

WHAT IS AsianOutlook?

A project of the Asian Pacific Fund, Asian Outlook was first published in 2003 with an inaugural edition presenting analysis of new U.S. Census data by income, geography, and Asian ethnic subgroup. This year we take a close-up look at two issues that dominate needs of Bay Area Asians: mental health and becoming a U.S. citizen.

A community foundation that connects donors to community needs, the Asian Pacific Fund is a unique resource to bring issues and information to public attention. We also work actively with donors who have ideas they want to explore or questions they want to answer about the Asian community.

You Can Help

Most of us are grateful for the lives we have in America. Many wonder how they can help those who are less fortunate. Some donors have already chosen to pool their contributions through the Asian Pacific Fund and--while we are proud that the Asian Pacific Fund has been able to contribute nearly $2.5 million in grants, scholarships and awards so far, there is still a great need. In fact, we must turn away more than 50% of the requests we receive. Please contact us if you have ideas, questions, or would like to help.
An Eye Toward the Future

Growing Up Asian in America –
10th Anniversary Celebration in 2005

The largest celebration of Asian Pacific American Heritage Month in the nation, Growing Up Asian in America is a signature program of the Asian Pacific Fund. In 2005 we will celebrate the 10th anniversary of this popular student essay and art competition which has annually distributed $27,000 in savings bond awards. In addition to the competition, the program has also featured an exhibit and commemorative book that showcase the winning entries. Both have been hosted by public libraries throughout the region.

In May 2005 to mark the 10th anniversary of the program, the Fund will host community celebrations in three Bay Area locations. Student winners will be invited to share their views about Growing Up Asian in America now that they are a few—in some cases many—years older, and they will discuss the impact of the program. The students will be joined by local college administrators and corporate executives who will discuss if young Asians are well prepared to enter college and the workforce.

This will be a time of celebration and reflection.

Please visit our web site at www.asianpacificfund.org for more information.

Donor Circles

Work is underway on two new donor circles, groups of people who want to support a specific program goal.

The new Filipino American Fund (or Fil-Am Fund) is raising money to support services that assist the local Filipino American community. In 2005 we will continue to support their development efforts to establish an endowed grant-making fund and to distribute grants to support local programs.

A second donor circle will establish an endowed fund to create a unique award that recognizes young Asian creative writers based in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Make a Gift that Lasts through Your Estate Plan

If you are thinking about making a charitable gift as part of your estate or financial plan (including a gift to your favorite community agency), we are happy to discuss your ideas or help you get answers to your questions. Please call Gail Kong, Executive Director at (415) 433-6859.

To Contact a Local Agency

Please visit our web site at www.asianpacificfund.org and click on Community Resource for a list of Bay Area Asian organizations that provide mental health, citizenship and other services.

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