Federal Officials Organize to Address Unique Health Needs of Pacific Islanders

By Houkje Ross

Closing the Gap, Pacific Islander Health • June/July 2000

Robert Underwood, Guam's non-voting delegate in the U.S. House of Representatives, believes that the needs of Pacific Islanders are too often overlooked by public and private policymakers, program managers, educators, and researchers.

Speaking May 9 before the Interagency Working Group (IWG) of the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI), Underwood said, "We could hold an entire oversight hearing on all the times Pacific Islanders have been overlooked." Underwood cited Reaching the Top, the College Board's 1999 report on higher education and minorities, as a case in point. "Pacific Islanders and Southeast Asians were not even included in the report," he said.

Federal officials and community representatives hope that the year-old White House Initiative will help direct attention and resources to the health, education, and social service needs of Pacific Islanders, as well as Native Hawaiians and Asian Americans. President Clinton issued Executive Order 13125 on June 7, 1999, creating the Initiative specifically to increase the participation of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in federal programs.

"I am committed to ensuring that Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian community groups in the continental U.S., Hawai'i, and in the U.S.-associated Pacific Island jurisdictions are at the table as full partners in all of our Initiative activities," said Shamina Singh, executive director of the White House Initiative. "There are numerous disparities faced by Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders that must be addressed."

The executive order also established the President's Advisory Commission on AAPIs and the IWG, which comprises officials throughout the federal government, and is chaired by Department of Health and Human Services Deputy Secretary Kevin Thurm.

Getting community feedback

Commission members plan to hold town hall meetings in California, New York, the Midwest, and Hawaii. According to Charmaine Manansala, senior policy analyst for the White House Initiative, getting feedback from Pacific Islanders and those who work with the population is an effective way to evaluate the needs.

At the May 2000 IWG meeting, Marie Ma'o, director of human and social services for American Samoa, described some of the challenges she faces in her work. "Grant applications for programs like Women, Infants, and Children are

often very complicated," Ma'o said. "If I have a question, I have to talk with a different person every time, which is time consuming."

Pacific Islanders who receive services through federal government programs also face language and cultural barriers. "Our family is the foundation of our culture. Services that you bring often don't make sense to us unless they serve the entire family," Ma'o said.

Ma'o used the example of having to translate a brochure that gave parents advice on how to deal with child abuse issues.

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President's Advisory Commission on AAPIs

The Presidential Commission on AAPIs, consists of 15 representatives from the AAPI community who will advise the President on actions needed to improve the lives of AAPIs.

Chair: The Honorable Norman Y. Mineta. Edgewater, MD. Nominee for U.S. Secretary of Commerce, and former member of U.S. House of Representatives. Vice President, Special Business Initiatives, Lockheed Martin.

Ms. Haunani Apoliona. Honolulu, HI. Trustee of the Office of Hawaiian Affairs for the State of Hawaii.

Ms. Gloria Caoile. Springfield, VA. Special Assistant to the President, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, and Vice President of the National Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance.

Ms. Martha Choe. Seattle, WA. Director, Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development, Washington state.

Ms. Susan Soon-Keum Cox. Eugene, OR. Expertise in the fields of international adoption and child welfare. Vice President of Public Policy and External Affairs, Holt International Child Services.

Mr. Vinod Dham. Freemont, CA. Chairman, President, CEO, Silicon Spice, Inc., a communications technology development firm.

Dr. Wilfred P. Leon Guerrero. Asan, Guam. President and owner, WP Leon Guerrero & Associates consulting firm in Guam.

Ms. Tessie Guillermo. San Francisco, CA. Executive Director of the Asian and Pacific Islander American Health Forum.

Mr. Dennis Hayashi. Sacramento, CA. Director of the State of California Department of Fair Employment and Housing.

Dr. David D. Ho. Chappaqua, NY. A distinguished AIDS researcher who serves as the Director and CEO of the Aareon Diamond AIDS Research Center.

Ms. Ngoan Le. Chicago, IL. Deputy Commissioner of Human Services for Chicago.

Mr. Jonathon R. Leong. Piedmont, CA. Businessman and President of JLA Companies. Founder of Asian Business Association.

Mr. Mukesh Patel. Atlanta, Georgia. Leader in the hospitality industry. Founding member of the Asian American Hotel Owners Association.

Ms. Jacinta Folasa Titialii. Philadelphia, PA. Vice President and Assistant General Counsel for Tenet Healthcare Corp.

Mr. Lee Pao Xiong. St. Paul, MN. Director of Government and Community Relations for Concordia University.

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The brochure contained the phrase "Respect your child." According to Ma'o, "Many families ended up throwing out the brochure because in the Samoan culture, the word respect is reserved for elders and leaders. In our culture, it didn't make sense for parents to be reading about respect for children. So we had to change the words to 'love your children;' that is something parents could understand."

Surveying federal agencies

In July, the IWG plans to complete a federal inventory of AAPI participation in major federal programs during 1999. Representatives from 32 federal agencies, including the Departments of Defense, Commerce, Energy, and Education, will report projects and initiatives designed specifically for AAPIs. They will also document current employment levels of AAPIs in the federal government. IWG members will then advise HHS Secretary Donna E. Shalala on the implementation and coordination of these federal programs.

Barbara Chow, associate director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), underscored the importance of this analysis. "These numbers hold an enormous amount of power," she said at the IWG meeting. "You can't do anything without the numbers." Chow noted that the Hispanic community felt underserved by Head Start programs for many years, but it wasn't until documentation and data were compiled that the federal government set goals to increase Hispanic participation in the program.

According to Sen. Daniel Akaka (D-HI), HHS is the only federal agency that has established a policy to implement OMB's newly revised standards for classifying race and ethnicity in government statistics. He strongly encouraged other agencies to implement the directive.

"Data collection and statistics for Pacific Islanders can best be described as dismal and inadequate," said Sen. Akaka. He and others are concerned that the larger numbers of Asian Americans make it harder to understand what the data might show about Pacific Islanders, who face different circumstances and challenges than Asian Americans. To many, the recent change to OMB standards—making it mandatory for federal data collectors to separate out data on Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islander groups from Asian American data—is a step in the right direction.

For more information on the White House Initiative on AAPIs, visit: http://www.hrsa.gov/aapi; or call (301) 443-2492. ❖