

Pacific Islander Community Council Serving Pacific Islanders in Southern California

By Houkje Ross

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Last year, the Pacific Islander Community Council (PICC) asked local community health centers in Southern California to identify how many Pacific Islanders they serve. What PICC found is that many organizations confused Pacific Islanders with Asian Americans. “They came back with numbers for how many Filipinos and Pacific Rim Asians they served, but Filipinos are not Pacific Islanders,” said Jane Ka’ala Pang, PICC’s special projects chair.

“Few know about Pacific Islanders—our health practices, cultural values, beliefs, and most of all, our health crisis.”

PICC, a grassroots organization in Carson, CA, was founded in 1991 to promote the cultural traditions, island practices, native languages, education, health, and welfare of all Pacific Islanders in Southern California. The Council represents Chamorros, Native Hawaiians, Samoans, Tongans, Tahitians, and other native Pacific Islanders from Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia.

Pang said in the last few years, health has become a main priority. Recent PICC surveys reveal that Pacific Islanders in the area face barriers to care because of lack of insurance or financial support, language and cultural barriers, and transportation.

Pacific Islanders have also reported problems with diabetes, cancer, heart disease, high blood pressure, and stroke. As a result, PICC has expanded its services on health education and care. Twenty volunteer community members serve on the council, representing Pacific Islanders from Ventura to San Diego.

PICC meets monthly to plan an annual Pacific Islander festival, leadership development workshops, health screenings, and community assessment surveys. PICC and the ‘Ainahau O Kaleponi Hawaiian Civic Club (HCC) have initiated several projects, addressing the importance of drug-free communities, senior nutritional centers, and breast cancer awareness.

PICC and HCC also joined together to hold a conference on Pacific Islander beliefs and health practices called, “Returning to Our Roots.” Held in 1999, the conference brought together seniors, academics, nutrition students, and service providers, and emphasized the importance of traditional foods for Pacific Islanders.

The conference focused on how taro (karo), sweet potato (‘uala), and breadfruit (‘ulu) serve not only as a nutritional source, but as spiritual energy. “These roots are foods of the Gods,” Pang said. HCC is working on a similar project focusing on traditional Hawaiian diet.

Upcoming PICC activities include partnering with health providers to ensure culturally and linguistically appropriate care. Through PICC, a small network of Pacific Islander health professionals will continue to volunteer at community events, educate the public, and provide health information and referral services to Pacific Islanders. “This will enable the community to gain a larger voice and become more recognized,” Pang said.

For more information on PICC, contact Jane Pang, 714-968-1785. ❖

