



SPECIAL PROJECTS

Building Bridges

How One Nonprofit Links Korean Americans With Health Care

By Christina Boufis

Health Systems Navigator Ahn Ja Sung (left in photo above) guides a client as she completes a health enrollment application form at Korean Community Services' Buena Park office.

Ellen Ahn, executive director of Korean Community Services (KCS), speaks with concern as she recalls the case of Sang-hee (not her real name), a 71-year-old undocumented and uninsured Korean immigrant. A KCS client, she has lived in Orange County for 14 years and has never visited a doctor in the United States.

“In technical terms, she is postponing care,” Ahn said. With her high blood pressure, high cholesterol and no means to access care, Sang-hee’s “typical” health condition of someone her age can worsen and “blow up into something huge.”

KCS, a nonprofit organization established in 1975 to assist Korean Americans and other immigrant groups in Orange County, works to break down linguistic and cultural barriers to health.

There are 83,000 Korean Americans living in Orange County — the second highest number in the United States behind Los Angeles — and, according to Ahn, they are the most linguistically isolated of all ethnic groups in the county. In addition, they have the highest rate of poverty, a high rate of chronic diseases like diabetes and “very little health care access,” Ahn said.

In December 2010, KCS received a three-year, \$125,000 core operating support grant from TCWF to provide outreach, health education, health care enrollment and navigation services for Korean Americans in Orange County.

“KCS fills an important niche,” said Frank A. Lalle, TCWF program director. “Korean Americans in Orange County face several health barriers — 31 percent are uninsured, including 24 percent of Korean seniors, many of whom are not eligible for Medicare” because of their undocumented status. Moreover, added Lalle, first-generation immigrants comprise a vast majority of this population and more than half report speaking English less than well — which can be a serious barrier to accessing health services.

“There are great programs out there for folks who are uninsured but if you don’t speak English, you’re a recent immigrant, and you also come from the group that has one of the highest noninsured rates, we don’t see the utilization that is there in other communities,” Ahn said.

To help bridge that gap, KCS hired Ahn Ja Sung, a health navigator and certified application assistant. In the past year, Sung, who is bilingual and bicultural, has helped enroll more than 350 monolingual Korean immigrants into programs such as Medi-Cal, Medicare, Healthy Families

A HELPING HAND TO NAVIGATE HEALTH SYSTEMS

For many years, Eun Yoo had forgone regular pediatric visits for her three children, ages 11, 16 and 17, since the family had no health insurance.

It was through a friend that Yoo first discovered the Health Systems Navigation Program at KCS. Though she had heard about Healthy Families, the low-cost health insurance plan for children and teens, Yoo had spent months trying to enroll online but found the process overwhelming.

“I had many questions,” Yoo said. She recalls not knowing where to input information and worried that her application would ultimately be rejected.

When she came to KCS, Yoo sat down with Sung, the agency’s health navigator, and together they completed the enrollment application.

“It was wonderful,” Yoo said of working with Sung. “It’s a relief for sure. My son was sick and he gets to have visits [with the doctor].”

“KCS fills an important niche.

and the Medical Services Initiative (an Orange County-sponsored plan for low-income residents).

For seniors like Sang-hee who are not eligible for Medicare, KCS can still help.

“We can at least guide her to where she needs to go for some preventive care,” Ahn said. In these cases, KCS links individuals to providers such as community clinics or other public health clinics — and refers patients to pharmacies, dentists and mental health care providers who offer culturally competent services where Korean is spoken.

In addition to her role as health care navigator, Sung conducts outreach at churches, fairs and community centers.

Three years ago, KCS only had a vision: “to do something around health care,” Ahn said. Today it operates three sites in Orange County — providing primary health care services, behavioral health care programs, parenting education, language services, and a host of other counseling and education programs.

“As long as we make a little dent, then we’re doing our job,” Ahn said. 🌱

