

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER

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Culture shift strains social services as elderly Asians' numbers rise

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By VANESSA HO

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

Two years ago, Chandra Sutanti was recovering from a stroke at a nursing home in Bellevue, and she was miserable. Sutanti spoke Indonesian and couldn't communicate with staff members and residents. She missed her sticky rice and Asian tripe. She found the hot dogs for dinner a gastronomical affront. She had no friends.

Her son then placed Sutanti in Legacy House, an assisted-living facility for seniors that serves mainly Asians. A feisty 79-year-old who loves bingo, Sutanti is happier, and her only complaint now is that the Chinese meals are never spicy enough.

"She's doing really, really well," said her son, Herman Setijono, who had struggled with the decision to put his mother in a facility. "She looks forward to going downstairs and being with people."

His family's plight illustrates a local and national trend, in which an increasing number of Asian seniors are no longer living with their adult children. Coupled with an increase in the number of elderly Asians, the break in tradition is leading to a growing strain on social services.

City providers who serve Asians are seeing expanding waiting lists and clients living farther away. Suburban services for seniors often lack bilingual workers and culturally relevant activities, leaving more and more elderly Asians living in isolation.

"With the kinds of services that are available for helping caregivers, Asian Americans are the most underserved population," said Clayton Fong, executive director of the National Asian Pacific Center on Aging, a Seattle-based advocacy group.

According to figures released today by the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of Asians 65 and



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Paul Kitagaki Jr. / P-I

Herman Setijono visits his mom, Chandra Sutanti, every day at the Legacy House, an assisted-living facility for seniors in the International District.

older increased by 9 percent in King County, from 13,289 in 1990 to 14,464 in 2000. Overall, the number of Asians of all ages grew by 66 percent.

In 1990, almost one in three Japanese Americans in Seattle was older than 65. In 2000, it was nearly one in five.

The percent of elderly Asians living outside of Seattle also increased, from 30 percent in 1990 to 45 percent in 2000. Most services for Asian seniors are based in Seattle's International District, and advocates worry about accessibility for the burgeoning Asian populations in suburbs such as Bellevue.

ASIAN POPULATION OVER 65							
U.S. Census numbers show that the number of elderly Asians – aged 65 or older – has grown in Seattle and King County since 1990.							
KING COUNTY				Ethnicity	SEATTLE		
	65 and older	Total	Elderly as percentage of ethnic population		65 and older	Total	Elderly as percentage of ethnic population
1990	8,609	113,140	8%	ALL ASIAN	5,984	58,040	10%
2000	15,460	187,745	8%		8,593	73,910	12%
1990	2,228	25,710	9%	CHINESE	1,628	15,084	11%
2000	4,429	45,018	10%		2,763	19,415	14%
1990	2,208	24,558	9%	FILIPINO	1,652	14,689	11%
2000	3,003	33,714	9%		1,811	15,867	11%
1990	312	11,030	3%	VIETNAMESE	161	5,309	3%
2000	1,356	27,484	5%		720	11,943	6%
1990	2,755	20,757	13%	JAPANESE	1,970	9,847	20%
2000	4,013	21,455	19%		2,279	8,979	25%
1990	611	12,524	5%	KOREAN	300	3,909	8%
2000	1,234	20,005	6%		419	4,863	9%

Source: 1990, 2000 Census SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER

Note: This chart has been corrected since original publication.

The vast majority of Asian seniors do not speak English as a first language, said Fong. They often struggle with the bureaucracy of social services and Medicaid. They feel out of place in programs and homes that offer Western food and activities.

And although Asian seniors represented a small portion -- 8 percent -- of the total Asian population in the 2000 census, their numbers are predicted to grow enormously in the next decade.

"Everybody talks about the aging baby boomers," Fong said. "But what they don't talk about is the changing face of that population. If the aging network wants to be ready, they're going to have to change their way of thinking."

In the 1960s the United States saw a wave of young Asian immigrants, and that wave is now beginning to need senior services, Fong said.

Asian adult children are often ingrained with a lifelong filial obligation, prompting many to want to care for their parents at home. The teachings of Confucius have imprinted a sense of lasting family hierarchy in Chinese society. And immigrants often feel an extra sense of responsibility for parents, after bringing them over from the native country.

But as generations of Asians become more "Westernized," and more couples work, fewer and fewer elderly parents live with family.

"In the past, the myth is that three generations in a household is an ideal," said Gary Tang, program director of Aging and Adult services at Asian Counseling and Referral Services.

"But it's not working. For example, the grandkids come home and want to watch MTV, and you're trying to watch news in China. Then when the adult children come home, the older people will say, 'You behave too American,' and they start to put pressure on the adult children."

Over the decades, Asians have begun to accept the practicalities of relying on senior services, but only when they are culturally accessible.

Advocates say Seattle has had a strong tradition of serving Asian seniors, beginning when Seattle Keiro, a nursing home for Japanese Americans, opened in 1976. That was followed in 1987 with the opening of the Kin On nursing home for Chinese Americans. Since then, Seattle has seen an increase in meal programs, assisted living facilities, drop-in centers and health care networks designed for Asian seniors.

When Kin On first opened, executive director Sam Wan recalled how only about half of the beds were filled.

"In the first couple of years, it was pretty difficult," he said. But as the community grew accustomed to the idea of a nursing home, interest blossomed. Now, the non-profit home has 100 beds, more than 100 people on a waiting list and clients who come from as far away as Spokane.

At the Bush Asia Center in the Chinatown, a city-funded program that offers hot meals to Asian seniors now serves about 600 people. Many come from far as Bremerton, Shoreline and Federal Way. Most live alone. The program also delivers meals to homebound seniors near the International District and is struggling to keep up with the increasing demand among clients who live farther away.

"Sometimes, even if the children don't want the parents to move out, they do because they're so sacrificing," said Vilma Fernandez, supervisor of the meal program, which is run by Legacy

House, an assisted-living facility operated by the Seattle Chinatown International District Public Development Authority.

In other cases, living alone is emotionally difficult.

"We have parents that have to be moved, and it's very, very bitter for the older person," she said.

"They don't talk about it, but you know they care for their kids because there's a lot of pictures in their apartment."

But places such as Legacy House, which serves low-income seniors in the International District, are helping the aging process. Opened in 1998, the 72-unit complex is open to anyone, but currently has a clientele that is mostly Chinese and Filipino. A typical menu offers Chinese porridge for breakfast and lemongrass fish for dinner.

Its staff speaks Vietnamese, Tagalog, Mandarin and Cantonese, among other languages.

On a recent night, after a meal of stuffed tofu with black beans, Chandra Sutanti rolled her walker with her son in the brightly lit lobby, past women chatting loudly in Cantonese. Her son, Herman Setijono, visits every day and often folds her laundry, tidies up her room or brings her snacks.

"I'm very traditional, I would like her to stay with me," said Setijono, a 44-year-old construction manager who lives in Bellevue. "But that's (only) if I don't work, if I can take care of her full time."

It was difficult for Setijono to place his mother in the facility, but both he and his wife work; they have three kids, and they live in a two-story house. He had come to the United States from Hong Kong as a student in 1974, and helped his mother come here 12 years ago, after the death of her husband. Setijono felt an enormous obligation toward her well-being.

As he visited with her in her small, well-scrubbed room, he felt better knowing his boisterous, opinionated mother was eating Asian food, had friends and was active.

And when he started talking about her bingo activities, and she interrupted him, yelling, "But no win!"

Setijono smiled.

*P-I reporter Vanessa Ho
can be reached at 206-
448-8003 or
vanessaho@seattlepi.com*

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