

# HEALTH *through* ACTION



## ALBUQUERQUE—New Mexico Asian Family Center

An estimated 545,000 people live in Albuquerque, the largest city in New Mexico. Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders make up about 2.7 percent of the city's population and they include recent immigrants as well as people from Japan, Vietnam, Korea, China and the Philippines. Like Asian Americans throughout the United States they often face language barriers, higher than average rates of certain diseases and, in some cases, family conflicts that can result in domestic violence.

### ADDRESSING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

With a grant through a national program called Health Through Action (HTA), The New Mexico (NM) Asian Family Center has been working to provide Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders with the information and services they need to address domestic violence, health care and other pressing issues. The center was created in 2006 as a direct service agency providing care and referrals for victims of domestic violence in the community and has expanded from that base, said Sherry Spitzer, executive director of the NM Asian Family Center.

According to a national survey by the U.S. Department of Justice, nearly 13 percent of Asian American and Pacific Islander women have experienced a physical assault from an intimate partner at least once in their lifetime. However, Spitzer says that Asian American and Pacific Islander women may be reluctant to speak out about violence in the home so these numbers may be much higher.

The NM Asian Family Center helps by identifying such women and giving them the assistance they need to secure medical care, food, clothing and safe housing options. A big part of that assistance is interpretation and translation services for women who cannot speak English proficiently, Spitzer said. "We get calls all the time to provide such services," she said, adding that the translation services can be critical to helping victims talk effectively to a police officer in a crisis or to a health professional.

But teaching victims to speak out about domestic violence can go far beyond language skills, Spitzer says.

She recalls a woman in the community who had received case management and counseling services through the NM Asian Family Center and who ultimately traveled to

*Photos (l to r): Portrait of Sherry Spitzer, Executive Director of New Mexico Asian Family Center. A troupe of Lion Dancers performs for a crowd at a local high school. A young boy drums during youth group activities at a Vietnamese temple. Women perform dances at a Thai temple in Albuquerque, New Mexico. All photographs © Adam Stoltman.*

**A PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM FUNDED BY WK KELLOGG FOUNDATION  
TO CLOSE HEALTH GAPS FOR ASIAN AMERICANS, NATIVE HAWAIIANS AND PACIFIC ISLANDERS**

**“WE HAVE COMMUNITY MEMBERS WHO HAVE DELAYED OBTAINING HEALTH CARE BECAUSE THEY HAVE NO INSURANCE. THROUGH HTA WE CAN HELP THEM BEGIN TO ACCESS THE CARE THEY NEED TO STAY HEALTHY.”—SPITZER**

Washington, D.C., to talk about her experience with domestic violence on Capitol Hill. “She was empowered by the ability to tell her story,” Spitzer said. Through HTA, the NM Asian Family Center hopes to highlight more such stories, ones that illustrate not just the strength in the community, but other health and social challenges that disproportionately affect Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

### **FOCUS ON HEALTH DISPARITIES**

Nationwide, more than half of all chronic hepatitis B cases occur in Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, but in New Mexico the disparity is extreme, Spitzer said. According to the New Mexico Department of Health there are nearly 83 cases of hepatitis B per 100,000 in the Asian American and Pacific Islander population but just 3.4 cases per 100,000 in the white population. Hepatitis B is an infectious disease that, if left untreated, can lead to liver cancer later in life.

The NM Asian Family Center helps Asian Americans, including those at risk for hepatitis B, navigate the U.S. health care system and access medical care that can prevent long-term damage and serious complications. With the proper treatment for hepatitis B, liver damage can be minimized or avoided.

Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders also suffer from higher than average rates of diabetes and heart disease. Smoking, an inactive lifestyle and consumption of high-calorie fast food can lead to weight gain and even obesity, and can be triggers for diabetes and heart disease.

To prevent unhealthy weight gain early in life, the NM Asian Family Center recently launched a martial arts program for elementary and middle school students. “There’s not a lot for Asian American and Pacific Islander youth to do after school,” Spitzer said. “This program gives them a chance to learn about martial arts and get the physical activity they need to stay fit,” she said. In addition, the staff can counsel students about the risks associated with smoking and offer them treatment if they have already taken up the tobacco habit, she said.

### **PROVIDING ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE**

Access to health care poses a challenge for many Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Spitzer said. Nationally 17 percent of Asian Americans and 21 percent of Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders lack health insurance. Without such coverage, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders often cannot afford to obtain medical care that can prevent early problems from progressing into chronic illnesses.



Visitors to New Mexico Asian Family Center in Albuquerque listening to a talk by Daphne Kwok, Chair of the President’s Advisory Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

With HTA funding, the NM Asian Family Center has started to educate local community members about the Affordable Care Act, a law that will provide health coverage to millions of uninsured Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders throughout the United States, including those in New Mexico. Beginning in 2014, the law will expand Medicaid and provide subsidies to make health insurance more affordable for low-income families. Many New Mexico families will qualify under the Medicaid expansion, Spitzer said. In addition, the law allows young adults to stay on a parent’s health insurance plan, meaning young Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders who are enrolled in college or who have yet to secure a job with health benefits can easily access needed medical care.

The center also helps residents who are not fluent in English or not familiar with the U.S. health care system to fill out the paperwork required to obtain health coverage under Medicaid or find free clinics if they do not qualify for existing public insurance programs. “We have community members who have delayed obtaining health care because they have no insurance and cannot afford to pay for medical care,” Spitzer said. “Through HTA we can help them begin to access the care they need to stay healthy.”

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