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Asian American and Pacific Islander Health Issues Highlighted in Congressional Briefing

Linguistic services and culturally competent programs key in addressing Diabetes, Hepatitis B, and HIV/AIDS

WASHINGTON, DC – Congressional leaders, health advocates and researchers called for better public awareness and increased congressional attention to the Asian American and Pacific Islander experience with the health issues of diabetes, Hepatitis B and HIV/AIDS at the May 23, 2006 “Asian American and Pacific Islander Health” Congressional Briefing hosted by the Asian & Pacific Islander American Health Forum (APIAHF) and the Association of Asian Pacific Community Health Organizations (AAPCHO).

Congressman Mike Honda, Chair of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus stated that, “The myth that there are no health problems among Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders needs to be dispelled, especially as preventable diseases such as diabetes and Hepatitis B continue to disproportionately impact these communities.”

“Translation and interpretation services, improved data collection, increased diversity of health professionals, and the expansion of the HHS-Office for Civil Rights must be part of all legislation passed to improve health outcomes in communities of color,” commented Congresswoman Donna Christensen, Chair Congressional Black Caucus Health Braintrust.

More than 50 participants representing members of Congress, national organizations, community based organizations and federal health agencies attended the Congressional Briefing to commemorate Asian Pacific American Heritage Month (May), Hepatitis Awareness Month (May) and Asian & Pacific Islander AIDS Awareness Day (May 19).

This was a timely briefing since the current attention to immigrants and language has highlighted how the health and safety of all Americans can be in jeopardy when there is an undercutting of federal, state, and local government’s capacity to provide vital information and services to immigrants and Americans who are speakers of other languages. ManChui Leung, HIV Program Director at APIAHF, emphasized that “Interpretation services, translated materials and cultural competency are key bridges to effective health information and programs in the Asian American and Pacific Islander community”.

Jane Kadohiro, Ph.D., Assistant Professor at the School of Nursing and Dental Hygiene, University of Hawai‘i and a woman who has lived with Type I diabetes for over 51 years, stated “Diabetes is the only major disease in which the death rate is still rising. Various local studies indicate that Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders may be more adversely affected by diabetes and its debilitating complications than other ethnic groups”. Dr. Kadohiro also highlighted local studies that demonstrated Asians, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders in Hawai‘i are 2 to 5 times more likely to have diabetes as Whites. Since so many people do not know they have diabetes until they are very ill, early screening is a key in preventing the disease. “Revisions to the current body mass index (BMI) standards that take into consideration the different body types of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are needed in order for there to be more accurate and consistent screening.”

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“From 1999 to 2003, AIDS cases increased by 35% among Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders which is the highest rate among all racial/ethnic groups,” said Frank Wong, Ph.D., Associate Professor in the Department of International Health at Georgetown University’s School of Nursing and Health Studies. Dr. Wong stressed the need for increased linguistically appropriate services and culturally tailored programming in order to reach community members effectively. In Dr. Wong’s local and national studies, he has found that, “The HIV testing rate among Asians Americans and Pacific Islanders is significantly lower than the average national HIV testing rate. Even though we are in the third decade of the AIDS pandemic, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders cannot answer basic HIV/AIDS questions correctly.”

Linguistic services such as interpretation and translated materials are vital to prevention and early detection. According to Dr. Wong, “Illness is still the main reason for HIV testing among Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders resulting in late diagnosis and fewer treatment options.” In one of Dr. Wong’s studies, he found that Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are less likely to know about their options for HIV/AIDS care and treatment because of the lack of linguistic services.

Educate, eradicate and empower were the key themes highlighted by Grace Tsai, Ph.D., from the Hepatitis B Initiative who works in faith based organizations in the Asian community to promote screening and vaccination. “Hepatitis B is a silent killer in the Asian American community. Chinese Americans are 6 times at greater risk, Korean Americans are 8 times at greater risk, and Vietnamese Americans are 13 times at greater risk for Hepatitis B than White Americans.” Hepatitis B can be eradicated by proper screening and vaccinations. Over half of the estimated 1.3 million Americans who are chronically infected with Hepatitis B are Asian Americans. “So many people do not know they have the virus and continue to spread it”, added Dr. Tsai. “We cannot lose anymore community members to a disease that is so preventable.”

The Congressional Briefing also highlighted the need to support the following legislation:

- National Hepatitis B Act with provisions for expansion of education, screening and vaccination.
- Diabetes Prevention, Access and Care Act with provisions for expanding the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey to include Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.
- Reauthorization of the Ryan White CARE Act which includes interpretation and translation services as a component of core medical services and the support of the Minority AIDS Initiative to build capacity and sustain care and treatment services in communities of color.
- Health Equality and Accountability Act which supports increased data collection by race, ethnicity and primary language in healthcare settings and research.

“Today’s briefing was an important step in raising awareness about Asian American, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islander health issues” commented ManChui Leung, HIV Program Director at APIAHF. “Often the Asian American and Pacific Islander community is overlooked in the discussion of health disparities. We feel this briefing will continue the dialogue with our members of Congress on how to improve the health and well-being of one of the fastest growing communities in America.”

“Comprehensive health legislation that takes into consideration the needs of underserved and diverse communities will save lives. It will make a difference for all Americans, including Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders,” concludes Jeff Caballero, Executive Director of AAPCHO.

The Asian & Pacific Islander American Health Forum is a national advocacy organization dedicated to promoting policy, program, and research efforts to improve the health and well-being of Asian and Pacific Islander communities. Founded in 1986, APIAHF approaches activities with the philosophy of coalition-building and developing capacity within Asian American and Pacific Islander communities.

The Association of Asian Pacific Community Health Organizations is a national, not-for-profit association of community health centers, dedicated to promoting advocacy, collaboration, and leadership that improves the health status and access of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders within the U.S., its territories, and the freely associated states, primarily through its member community health clinics.

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