

AN EMERGING CRISIS: MEETING THE SERVICE NEEDS OF IMMIGRANT OLDER ADULTS

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Older adults are seldom included in the ongoing debates raging across America about immigrant populations. In fact, their existence is unnoticed, their plight is generally ignored, and the issues facing immigrant older adults and their families are hidden from the mainstream. That is why the recent article in the New York Times, *'Invisible Immigrants, Old and Left with 'Nobody to Talk to'*, is an important alert, especially to the field of aging and our work.¹

Although focused on California, the stories of older immigrant adults - from India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Korea - are not only west coast stories nor limited to only these immigrant groups. Being transplanted to the States and to a vastly different culture, often late in life, brings loneliness, isolation, and depression for the older immigrants living in ethnic or religious communities enclaves throughout urban, suburban and rural areas.

The demographics pose a staggering profile. Older adults now make up America's fastest growing immigrant group, comprising about 11% of the country's recently arrived immigrants. Since 1990, the number of foreign born residing in the States, age 65 and over, has grown from 2.7 million to 4.3 million. By 2050, they are expected to number 16 million. Approximately 3/4 of older immigrants speak little or no English. Almost a fifth live below the poverty level. Language barriers, absence of social connections, and values that often conflict with the dominant American culture and their assimilated children and families make immigrant elderly among the most isolated individuals.

It should not surprise us that immigrant older adults have unmet needs, will generally not seek help, and are thus underserved. The challenge for our agencies will be to meet the anticipated service needs of those from very different cultures, languages, values, religions, and immigration and refugee experiences. The NY Times article highlights several creative ways to reach out to, engage, and serve immigrant older adults with culturally appropriate services. But the professional literature, although replete with studies on the impact of growing old in America among immigrants,² offers no best-practice models or innovative initiatives to break through the cultural and linguistic barriers that keep immigrant older adults isolated and prevent them from using services. We know, however, based on the experiences of the child welfare and mental health fields, that culturally competent services go deeper than language translation and adapting existing programs. Agencies will need to rethink their operating assumptions to find ways to incorporate the hopes, values, and beliefs of immigrant populations. And, it will also require a shift from the more typical individualistic, client-centered perspective to a holistic, community-based orientation. Addressing the service needs of these populations is likely to make great demands on agencies especially given the current political climate that views services to all immigrants as a costly endeavor straining government and private resources.

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1 Brown, P. L. (31 August 2009). *Invisible Immigrants, Old and Left with 'Nobody to Talk to.'* New York Times, p. 1 & A10.

2 See, for example, "Social Work with Older Immigrants and their Families", a special issue of the Journal of Gerontological Social Work (2009 July, 52/5).

We Look forward to your comments and experiences.