



VNS Health Community Programs Help Asian-American Seniors in Chinatown Age Safely in Home

By Chandra Wilson, May 26, 2022



Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Heritage Month is a time to celebrate the contributions and history of the AAPI population in the USA. The AAPI community has played a huge role in building a vital, dynamic New York City, where people of all different backgrounds can come together to celebrate what makes them unique.

However, with the uptick in xenophobic attacks against the AAPI community in New York City, anxiety is high. Seniors, who have been the target of many of these attacks, are now dealing with an added layer of fear and stress on top of an already challenging time. It's clear that culturally sensitive, patient-centered care is needed now more than ever.

That's where VNS Health comes in. For aging members of the AAPI community who are isolated by poor health and language barriers, the VNS Health Chinatown Neighborhood Naturally Occurring Retirement Community (NNORC) and Chinatown Community Center is a lifeline, helping improve health and social welfare for individuals and families in the neighborhood. The programs offer home outreach, activities, workshops, and connection.

The VNS Health Chinatown NNORC provides help to residents 60 years and older living within a 24-block radius, helping members stay in their homes as they age as opposed to moving into a facility.

Helen Sit, manager of the Chinatown NNORC, has spent over 15 years empowering Chinatown's seniors. "The NNORC is a big resource for this population, making them feel secure by having a service that helps

them,” said Helen. “Our members will call us for many things, for example, when they receive a letter in the mail worried that their benefits will be cut off because the language barrier prevents them from reading in English. We help them navigate many things, including social security, entitlements, insurance, and other matters where we can provide resources and support.”

Available services include individual social and health case management/case assistance for walk-in and homebound clients, support groups, health education, blood pressure screenings, recreational activities, workshops, mental health initiatives, and more. They also partner with other community agencies to provide better services and referrals for the community, with services provided for free.

Since its inception in 2007, the NNORC has served nearly 1500 seniors, many referred by their families, neighbors, and community partners.

“It is so important for seniors who have lived in the same community, or even the same apartment, for decades, to age comfortably in their homes,” said Wai Kiu Man, LMSW. “To be able to provide essential services is a great privilege for me, and it provides comfort to this vulnerable population.”

Working collaboratively with the NNORC is VNS Health’s Chinatown Community Center, which hosts events to help people stay healthy and to connect them to needed services. Like the NNORC, services are free, including weekly English and exercise classes, educational workshops, and referrals. Individuals also don’t have to live in Chinatown to visit or use the Community Center, to ensure the Center can serve any one in need.

Yan, a resident of Chinatown for more than 15 years, is both a member of and a volunteer at the Chinatown NNORC. She stresses the importance of community support given heightened anxiety among the AAPI population in the neighborhood. Citing her fears of taking her grandson to the park and using mass transit because of harassment, Yan relies heavily on the Chinatown NNORC for her wellbeing. By participating in the “Golden Networking” support group, she said she can better navigate how to stay safe during the pandemic. She also learned how to take her own blood pressure at home thanks to a project collaboration between the VNS Health Chinatown NNORC, the Chinese American Nurses Association, and a Noble Trust grant.

Shirley, another Chinatown NNORC member and volunteer said, “during the pandemic, I lost my SNAP benefits. Thanks to the social worker at NNORC, they helped me reapply immediately so I can continue to live and stay in this community happily.”

For many in the Chinatown NNORC, volunteering is also a way of paying it forward. “I try to give all the time I can as a volunteer,” said Yan. “I’ve gotten so much out of the Chinatown NNORC that it is an honor to give back.”

To learn more about the VNS Health Chinatown NNORC and Chinatown Community Center, visit vnshealth.org.