



Holly Vossel, Sept 22, 2023

VNS Health has developed community education programs to boost awareness and hospice utilization among Chinese populations in New York City.

Having a diverse staff, as well as outreach materials in various dialects, are two keys to developing culturally competent public education programs designed for Asian Americans, according to Teresa Lin, vice president of cultural market development at VNS Health.

“It’s important that you have staff who speak their own language and dialects, because even just in the Chinese language there are so many different dialects,” Lin told Hospice News. “We intentionally hire staff so that collectively as a team we are really trying to understand the cultural aspects, religions and have educational materials that are translated in a language that they understand. An important thing with access to care is that so many of our clients are immigrants or people who have limited English proficiency and there’s still quite a lot of challenges navigating the health care system.”

Lin has overseen the organization’s Chinatown Community Centers since the first such facility launched in Manhattan roughly 24 years ago. VNS Health recently opened an additional center in Queens and one in Brooklyn last December.

The three centers “fill a vital need” in connecting many seriously or terminally ill older adults with culturally sensitive health care services, she stated.

The centers have played a pivotal role in VNS Health’s ability to reach a growing base of Asian American patients to come on to their hospice services when they become eligible, according to Lin.

“Even our nurses have been telling me that compared to when we first started, they’re seeing a lot more Asian patients in our [hospice] program,” Lin told Hospice News. “So, it says a lot about how receptive the people are from this community. There’s just so much we can do together for them.”

Bilingual staff at the centers host community engagement activities and hold seminars explaining the nature of hospice. Local Asian American organizations, faith groups and other health care providers have partnered with VNS Health on these events.

VNS Health recently rolled out a hospice education campaign across the centers this summer. The aim was to break down the most common barriers of access among Asian American communities – misconceptions and fear around end-of-life care, Lin explained.

“There are a lot of opportunities for health care professionals to really work together to break down these barriers and provide easy access to those who want to learn more, and who can receive the services,” Lin said. “It’s really having the team approach with our nurses, social workers, providers and counselors so that people don’t feel like they’re alone. Someone is holding their hands and navigating the challenging time, providing those resources and really raising the awareness.”

A common misunderstanding among Asian American communities around end-of-life care is that hospice is a place that loved ones go to die as opposed to services terminally ill patients can receive in the home or facility-based settings. This misconception largely comes from differences in end-of-life care delivery in Asian countries, Lin stated.

For instance, in Hong Kong, home hospice services “don’t exist,” or are “very limited,” she said. This means patients and families are often unaware that end-of-life care can be delivered in the home by their family members or other caregivers, Lin explained.

“It’s a common hospice myth to debunk, but important to providing services to this community,” Lin told Hospice News.

Caregivers play a key role in “debunking” misconceptions and improving hospice access among Asian American seniors, she stated. Having caregivers share their experiences has helped other families learn how these and other health services can support loved ones earlier in their illnesses, Lin said.

“In some of our workshops [we] invite caregivers to give testimonials,” she said. “Early referral is really important and sometimes people don’t get that information until the last days. There’s so much more that the [hospice] team can offer. Caregivers have said, ‘I really appreciate what you did ... how you helped the entire family be more comfortable.’ That’s so powerful.”

Hospice News is an online trade publication based in Chicago, covering the hospice care industry, reaching an audience of over 19,000