

MOBILIZATION OF SERVICES FOR SENIOR CITIZENS OF INDIAN ORIGIN: HOW ARE WE DOING AND WHAT WE HAVE YET TO DO?

INTRODUCTION:

I have outlined the issues and concerns of the elders of Indian Origin in USA. The two broad categories of these seniors are (a) Those who came here in late sixties or early seventies of the 20th century; some may have come earlier, considered as **Early Immigrants**; and (b) Those who came in late 80's or 90's and even later, known as **Recent or Late Immigrants**. Those in category (a) were mostly professionals and they raised their families in USA; while immigrants in category (b) primarily came here as dependents on their adult children. The third important group of seniors is those of **Single Seniors** who may come from either of the above two categories. The issues of single seniors who never married, widowed or divorced are not only similar to those falling in the above two categories but their major concerns also relate to lack of companionship, dignified acceptance in the community and at times within their own family.

Issues and concerns expressed here are based on the writer's experience in the last some 12 years with various senior programs – Indian American and others -- and conferences and workshops conducted by the National Indo-American Association for Senior Citizens (NIAASC) as well as collaborative efforts with other organizations in arranging conferences for seniors in California, Philadelphia, New Jersey and New York.

Today we are addressing only few pertinent issues during this session. It does not mean that other issues are not pertinent, but time constraint is a handicap in this respect. However, almost all issues have been covered in the conferences and workshops that appear on the web site of NIAASC. We are fortunate to have distinguished speakers directly involved in these pertinent issues. **Mr. Iggy Ignatius**, CEO and Founder of Shanti Niketan in Florida, the first Retirement Housing Complex for Indian Americans; **Dr. Vasundhara Kalasapudi**, Founder President of India Home Inc. which addresses issues and seek resolutions through multiple collaborative activities; and **Dr. Kul Anand**, Senior Attending Physician in Geriatric Medicine, Parker Jewish Institute for Healthcare and Rehabilitation speaking on 'Health Aspects of Seniors.'

COMMON CONCERNS TO SENIORS IN BOTH CATEGORIES OF SENIORS:

1. Lack of awareness about private and public services to seniors in their local communities
2. Lack of full awareness about Entitlement Programs: Social Security, SSI, Medicare and Medicaid
3. Inexperience and lack of forward planning for financial management
4. Lack of awareness about important legal documents” Wills, Durable Power of Attorney, and Health Proxy
5. Family Conflicts and Compromises leading to a dilemma for Seniors and other family members
6. Lack of awareness about Bereavement Services particularly in relation to spouse loss
7. Absence of participation in local civic associations and programs in their own neighborhood

ISSUES AND CONCERNS OF EARLY IMMIGRANTS: category A

In addition to the common concerns mentioned above, early immigrants who though are close to the mainstream residents, have some concerns because most of them came as professionals and their focus had been just on their work and family. Some of those concerns are:

1. Lack of early planning for 'After Retirement' issues such as Housing, Financial Management
2. 'Sandwich' Conflicts being between their parents and their own children
3. Lack of full understanding of inter-generational communication and dialogue
4. Conflicts due to their unmet expectations from their children

ISSUES AND CONCERNS OF RECENT OR LATE IMMIGRANTS: Category B

These immigrants who came to USA when they were already seniors have a different set of issues. They never worked here; did not have a peer support group except their family; were adhering more to their traditional family, social and cultural values. Some of their concerns are:

1. Lack of adjustment with new way of life in USA due to strict adherence to traditional values and customs
2. Economic Dependence on Children: Reversal of Role thus uneasiness in long run
3. Loneliness as adult children go to work and young ones go to school
4. Lack of accessibility to service programs due to problems related to transportation, language or accent
5. Lack of respect for seniors and secondary role in the family decision-making process

MOBILIZATION OF SERVICES FOR SENIORS IN THE LAST DECADE OR SO:

In the last about a dozen-year time, efforts have been made by community leaders to recognize special needs and concerns of seniors. Many Indian community organizations have taken steps to develop programs for seniors and integrate them as part of their other activities. There was also gradual awareness about the senior centers and programs run by private and public entities with the Federal financial support, though this awareness was miniscule. Even seniors, particularly late immigrants, felt an urge and thus a necessity to have their own support groups. During the late nineties motivated by the Global Organization of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO), the National Indo-American Association for Senior Citizens (NIAASC) that offered information, referral and advocacy services, was initiated. With all these groups in action a number of services have been mobilized for seniors. Some of them are listed here:

1. Presentations/Implementation of Legal Instruments such as Wills, Health Proxy, Durable Power of Attorney.
2. Presentation on Entitlement Programs by Experts in the field
3. Local senior programs with multiple activities such as celebrations of national days, festivals, birthdays and anniversaries, yoga, trips outside to places of interest, memory games, picnics.
4. Development of Retirement Housing, SHANTI NIKETAN, in Florida
5. Employment of seniors under Federal programs
6. Development of a booklet in California for understanding & awareness of funeral related matters
7. Publications of various books and articles for the benefit of Indo-American seniors (viz. Mapping the Maze by Harikrishna Majmundar)
8. Networking among senior programs to learn from one another through collaborative conferences

ISSUES STILL NEEDING ATTENTION:

1. Development of Social Circle/s for Emergency Situations, when a family or friend is in need
2. Development of a Bereavement Support System (California Publication is one example)
3. Social and Economic Community Support System for Needy Elders
4. Concerted Efforts to Encourage Inter-Generational Communication & Dialogue
5. Affordable Senior/Retirement Housing in Different parts of Country (Shanti Niketan is example)
6. Assimilation and Integration through and within our Local Civic Associations
7. Proper Database of Indian Elders (including organized groups): education, occupation, economic, demographic, religious and other characteristics
8. Development of Assisted Living and Nursing Home where Indians may feel comfortable. (one nursing home in NJ caters to Indians)

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Rajeshwar Prasad, Executive Director and Co-Founder National Indo-American Association for Senior Citizens Inc. (NIAASC): Web site: www.niaasc.org; E-mail: niaasc@aol.com