

MEETING HIDDEN NEEDS

THROUGH ECHO-SGV

By Alex Chu, Community Health Worker

One day, I visited a neighborhood with many retired couples who seemed financially stable. However, I met an elderly couple with a very different situation. They lived in a townhouse but were still paying a mortgage and struggling to afford food on a daily basis. After the government shutdown, their SNAP benefits were disrupted. Because they do not speak English, they were unable to understand what happened or how to resolve the issue.

When I asked if they considered local food pantries or food distribution sites, they explained their reluctance to apply for any additional government or community assistance programs. Part of this was due to the language barrier, but another major reason was cultural. They felt embarrassed and uncomfortable receiving food assistance and did not understand why they should accept help. They were not aware that in the U.S., seeking support during times of need is nothing to feel ashamed of.

Through our conversation, I learned that the husband receives about \$1,400 per month in retirement income, while the wife receives only \$200 to \$300. Despite this limited income, they still have to pay their mortgage, utilities, and food expenses. Their monthly income is simply not enough to meet basic needs. To cope, they eat less, rely on fruit trees at home, or cut back on meals. I found this concerning, as eating less does not mean eating healthier. Many older adults, especially in the Chinese community, believe that “eating less is fine,” but this often leads to poor nutrition and long-term health risks. I encouraged them to consider nearby food pantries and explained how these resources work. Eventually, they agreed to try and I provided the details (address, date, and time).



This experience sheds light on a broader issue: many older adults, especially those from earlier immigrant generations, face language barriers, lack access to information, and are hesitant to seek help. Even when many community resources are available, these services often don't reach individuals who are unwilling or unable to step outside their comfort zone.

It also reminded me that we should never assume a community is doing well simply because the environment looks stable or affluent. Hidden needs still exist. This is why on-the-ground outreach and community assessments are so important. Community health workers play a critical role as connectors and advocates, helping to identify individuals who are often overlooked and bringing their needs to the attention of other organizations. Even if the need is small—ten or twenty people—their struggles are real. This experience reinforced the importance and value of community-based work and why our role in the community truly matters.

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