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# The Fight to Save Welfare for Low-Income Older Asian Immigrants: The Role of National Asian American Organizations

Grace J. Yoo

On August 22, 1996, President Clinton signed the federal welfare reform law that ended legal immigrants' eligibility of federal means tested entitlements. Because of federal welfare reform, immigrants were no longer eligible for federal cash assistance, food stamps, and Medicaid. The context for the passage of federal welfare reform was ripe. During President Clinton's 1996 re-election campaign for the presidency, he pledged to the nation to "end welfare as we know it." While the Republicans in 1994 gained a majority in Congress, the focus became limiting single mothers on AFDC and eliminating eligibility for public assistance to legal immigrants and those considered "undeserving," such as substance users and disabled children. Politicians from moderate and conservative persuasions agreed that legal immigrants were not entitled and worked to end their eligibility.

The program under attack was the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program, an entitlement program that provides monthly cash assistance to low-income older adults and disabled individuals. From 1986 to 1994, the number of immigrant SSI recipients grew by about 15 percent annually, and in 1994 legal immigrants represented 12 percent of all recipients (U.S. GAO 1996). Approximately 70 percent of these legal immigrants on SSI were the elderly. At the time, 500,000 legal immigrants who were aged or disabled would have been affected by the impending cuts to their cash. Health assistance cuts to legal immigrants accounted for \$13.5 billion of the law's \$55 billion in long-term savings. Although anti-

immigration sentiments helped push this legislation, legislators failed to realize the impact this law would have on the daily needs of disabled and elderly immigrants, and the impact at the local and state government level in trying to meet these needs. The overwhelming picture that Congress received was that these elderly immigrants were quite able and were not needy of assistance (Yoo 2001).

The federal welfare reform bill in 1996 impacted large numbers of individuals in the Asian American community. Many foreign-born Asians in the United States became ineligible for federal safety nets. Based on the 1990 U.S. Census, the numbers of Asian noncitizens on public assistance varied by age and type of public assistance (See Table 1). In the Asian American community, this law specifically impacted older, low-income, limited English-speaking Asian immigrants on Supplemental Security Income. Many older Asian immigrants who arrive in their fifties and sixties have limited work histories and often are not able to qualify for Social Security when they are sixty-five years old. As a result, many low-income older Asian immigrants have traditionally relied on Supplemental Security Income for income maintenance and for Medicaid for health care access. With the exception of Japanese elderly immigrants, a majority of Asian elderly immigrants received Supplementary Security Income in 1990 (See Table 1).

A majority of Asian immigrants who come to the United States fall under the category of family reunification programs. Many elderly immigrants arrive because their adult son or daughter sponsors them. Because of federal welfare reform, the law now requires immigrants sponsoring family members to the United States make at least 125 percent of the poverty level, or \$19,500 for a family of four (Dugger 1999). The law also states that sponsors must provide basic support to new immigrants, or they may be sued by the sponsored immigrants and by the agencies for the amount of benefits provided to sponsored immigrants (Immigration and Naturalization Service 1993). For many Asian immigrants, the damage of federal welfare reform is that many Asian immigrants, both young and old, now feel uncertain of their rights and fear penalties associated with applying for assistance, including denial of citizenship and sponsorship liability, so many immigrants forego benefits to which they are legally entitled (Yoo 1998).

Federal welfare reform impacted many different low-in-

come communities. For the Asian American community, the impending rollbacks to immigrants on welfare would prove to be most drastic for older, low-income Asian immigrants on Supplemental Security Income. This particular article focuses on how national Asian American organizations involved themselves in this political debate. Specifically, this article asks the following question: How did national Asian American organizations define and influence the 1996 federal welfare reform and immigrant debate?

Table 1. Percent of Asian Noncitizens by Age Group Receiving Public Assistance Income<sup>1</sup> in 1990

Asian Ethnicity	Under 65 Yrs	65 Yrs and Over
Chinese	2.8%	36.2%
Filipino	1.1%	34.3%
Japanese	0.5%	10.2%
Asian Indian	1.2%	30.2%
Korean	1.1%	44.2%
Vietnamese	12.3%	53.8%
Cambodian	20.9%	53.5%
Hmong	23.6%	66.4%
Laotian	14.8%	58.3%
Thai	1.2%	44.2%
Other Asian	1.7%	29.5%

Source: Asian & Pacific Islander American Health Forum, Policy Brief: End of Health Care for Immigrants (San Francisco: API American Health Forum, June 1996).

### Methodology

A non-random, purposive sample was used. The basis for selecting an organization or activist is their ability to affect national political outcomes (Field, Higley and Burton 1990.) A list of national Asian American organizations, identified from the Organization of Chinese American (OCA) database of national Asian American organizations, and the membership list of the National Council of Asian Pacific Americans (<http://www.ncapanet.org>) were used. These two lists were used because they are the most comprehensive and up-to-date listings of national Asian American organizations in the United States.

A total of thirty-one national Asian American organizations were identified and contacted. Twenty-seven, or 87 percent, of the national Asian American organizations responded to this telephone survey. National Asian American organizations represented ethnic-specific or gender-specific organizations, and had mission

statements that included serving the Asian American community, serving service providers, leadership development, civil rights/immigrant rights and/or improving the health status of Asian Americans. The large majority (80 percent) of national Asian American organizations reported budgets under \$1 million; only 20 percent had budgets that exceeded that.

From a list of organizations, key informants were identified for telephone interviews. In choosing key informants, those selected<sup>2</sup> were those with direct decision-making authority regarding the national advocacy of their organization. Between September and December 1998, telephone calls were made by the researcher to these selected key informants. The telephone interviews were conducted using a Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) system. If the key informant was not available, at least five callbacks were made to make an appointment for a telephone interview. Domains in the telephone survey include information regarding the organization and its role in welfare reform, collaborative efforts, perceptions of immigrant welfare recipients, and influence in policymaking. A majority of the questions were open-ended to permit an unlimited number of answers; however, some close-ended questions were used for comparison and analysis. One question measures the importance of welfare reform to the organization and utilized a Likert scale. The survey was then pre-tested with several nonprofit advocates prior to the start of these telephone interviews to get an understanding of the length of the questionnaire, question order, format, non-responses, and question format. Modifications were made after the initial pre-testing.

An important goal was to understand how these organizations responded and effectively advocated at the beginning, during, or after welfare reform. In order to answer this question entirely, both a qualitative and quantitative approach was utilized. Codes for close-ended questions were data-entered onto SPSS. Themes from the open-ended questions were identified and then coded quantitatively and data-entered onto SPSS for further statistical analyses. Descriptive frequencies and cross tabulations were done to address the research questions.

## Findings

The findings are organized by the types of questions asked during these in-depth interviews, including what the perceptions

of older Asian immigrant welfare recipients were by federal lawmakers, the advocacy efforts of national Asian American organizations, the effectiveness of these advocacy efforts, and the barriers and challenges they faced in advocating for the needs of older Asian immigrant welfare recipients. Overwhelmingly, 100 percent of the national Asian American organizations interviewed felt that federal lawmakers perceived Asian elderly immigrant welfare recipients negatively, and that advocates faced a rough road in combating these stereotypes. According to these national advocates, federal lawmakers perceived large numbers of immigrants coming to the United States to fraudulently obtain welfare, and policymakers were raising fraud issues on immigrants' utilization of SSI, and at the same time, not providing a comprehensive understanding of the diverse backgrounds of immigrants.

According to 100 percent of the national advocates interviewed, stereotypes abounded particularly about Asian elderly immigrants on SSI and their adult children. Most often the picture being painted was that sons and daughters of these Asian elderly immigrants were walking away from their responsibilities and leaving it up to the U.S. taxpayer to pick up the tab. In particular, older Asian immigrants and their families were seen as going against the model minority stereotype and abusing the system. One advocate describes the feeling at that time among federal lawmakers:

In the early 80s, it was like the welfare queens and now it was like immigrants who were seen as taking advantage of the system. The focus was on Asian immigrants. It was sort of the image of Asian elderly immigrants getting on SSI as soon as possible and yet they have sons and daughters driving around in a Mercedes Benz. It clashed with the model minority image. They thought these immigrants were fraudulent and not deserving.

According to these national Asian American advocates, Asian immigrant elderly and their families were particularly targeted during the federal welfare reform hearings. The adult children of these older immigrants were painted as financially able, but intentionally scamming the government so their mother or father could attain SSI. Asian immigrant families were perceived as petitioning older family members to come to this country for the sole purpose of attaining SSI. By using Asians as examples, immigrant families

were constructed as “irresponsible” when it came to sponsoring a relative to immigrate.

Several national advocates suggested that the reasons why older Asian immigrants on SSI were targeted was due to the fact that they did not vote, and moreover, that they could probably not attain U.S. citizenship due to language and cultural problems, and therefore would not be a threat to lawmakers. One national advocate states that the perceptions by lawmakers were that older immigrants on SSI “. . . don’t have political clout. They are primarily an unproductive member of our community. They are a budgetary drain on local and charitable institutions. They don’t speak our language.”

According to several advocates, it was an easier population on which to target cutbacks because there would be no fear of reprisals. They were not a constituency that politicians believe would affect them at the polls. However, another advocate states that “they were counting on the immigrant population not organizing against this and making the presumption that this sector of immigrants wouldn’t be able to respond.”

### Actions of National Asian American Organizations

Over half of the organizations interviewed were actively involved in fighting the passage of this bill. After the passage of the bill, the numbers of national Asian American organizations involved increased. Three-fourths of national Asian American organizations were now involved. For many advocates, members of Congress was their biggest challenge. Advocates suggested that Congress was bent on cutting back on immigration and welfare. Even though advocates tried to paint a different picture of older immigrants and the need for a federal safety net, lawmakers seemed to ignore the complexity of the problem. Advocates suggested that the federal budget process and the need to reform welfare provided no other political alternative.

According to national advocates, after the passage of the federal welfare reform bill, national Asian American organizations reacted urgently by organizing locally and voicing opposition. Thousands of Asian immigrant elderly were about to face impending cuts to their monthly income. National Asian American organizations were taking action to stop this policy from being implemented. The top three types of advocacy actions cited most often by these national advocates included meeting with public officials

(57.7 percent), building and joining coalitions (53.8 percent), and letter-writing campaigns (38.5 percent) (Table 2). Educating the public and policymakers and utilizing the media were also stated as types of advocacy actions in which national Asian American organizations were engaged. A major way this was done was through putting faces on the issue:

As the law coming to, we put faces to the issue. We had a news conference. We had elders from Laos, Cambodia and put a face on the people. . . It was more effective as a coalition. There were a lot of Jewish groups, Hispanic and Asian groups, and immigration lawyers were involved. It became an interesting coalition, but it was much more effective.

A majority of the respondents reported that once lawmakers knew whom was impacted and when groups became coalesced, lawmakers started to pay attention to this issue and worked toward restorations.

Table 2. Types of Involvement on Federal Welfare Reform Done by National Asian American Organizations: 1996-1998		
Type of Involvement	N	%
Dissemination of Educational Materials	2	11.8
Building and Joining Coalitions	9	52.9
Meeting w/public officials	9	52.9
Participating in demonstrations	3	17.6
Letter-writing campaigns	9	52.9
Media Work	5	29.4
Total Respondents	17	100.0
Answers from question 4b from survey: In what ways was your organization involved?		

### Efforts to Form Coalitions

According to national advocates, as different groups and institutions were being affected by welfare reform, different groups also started to come together to combat and advocate for those affected by the changes in the law. After the passage of federal welfare reform, a broad coalition of different organizations came together. One national advocate states:

The congress went too far in terms of cutting SSI benefits and it created this perception of elderly immigrants being kicked out of SNFs and it created an uncomfortable position for legislatures and this created a broader coalition now with aging



groups. It sent a backlash. It broadened the coalition and more people became involved in the issue.

Groups that normally did not work together coalesced and found themselves working to restore lost federal entitlements to immigrants. There was an urgency in having this law re-examined, especially since many older Asian immigrants were about to lose their means for survival. Most of the respondents suggested that not just one organization could be successful alone, but that other types of organizations needed to be involved, and this meant expanding coalitions beyond traditional boundaries in order to gain some political influence. About two-thirds (65.2 percent) of all national Asian American groups that worked on welfare reform worked collaboratively with other national immigration groups (See Table 3). More than three-fourths (78.3 percent) of these groups spent time working with other national Asian American organizations on this issue. In addition, nearly two-thirds (66.0 percent) worked with local and regional organizations on this issue, especially with local and regional groups in California, New York, Illinois and Minnesota. One-third (33.3 percent) worked with national aging organizations on restoring SSI to older Asian immigrants. One national Asian American advocate states how these types of coalitions worked and describes the difficulties associated with working with such a diverse coalition:

Unique partnerships that emerged were temporary and some hopefully long-lasting. The intersection of welfare and immigration were complex. The people who worked in poverty had to learn the whole immigration construct and those working in immigration rights had to learn TANF, SSI and Medicaid. We really needed each other. Some of the cross over, like disability groups paying more attention to racial ethnic minorities, and on our end understanding how disabled minorities are sometimes worse off.

One national Asian American advocate states that different types of groups came together to work on this issue, but the work was also about educating each other and reframing the issue.

Traditionally national Aging and Asian American organizations work on the other [different] side of the aisle. But we just needed to find a critical mass in terms of coalition work, and

approach it from a certain framing of things. . . It’s a matter of framing the argument.

This respondent articulated the process of coalition building, but also the need to work together to re-frame how elderly immigrants were perceived by lawmakers. This often meant reframing it as not simply a Latino or Asian immigrant issue, but an issue that affected European immigrants as well:

After the bill passed, we worked closely with the white ethnic groups because we knew one thing about the U.S. is that it is a racist country. We met with a white House official, and he mentioned that we needed to bring out the white faces. You have to have people see beyond the Asian and Latino elders and so there was a lot of efforts to get the stories of Soviet Jews and the Portuguese and really to get other communities to come forward and not realize that it was simply a yellow and brown people issue.

Many of the national Asian American organizations suspected that race and racism played a role in ending federal means-tested entitlements to immigrants. According to these respondents, non-white immigrants were associated with welfare use and abuse.

Table 3. National Asian American Organizations that Collaborated with Other Groups around Federal Welfare Reform: 1996-1998		
<b>Responses</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Local and State Organizations</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>67.0</b>
<b>National Aging Organization</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>33.3</b>
<b>National Immigrant Organizations</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>76.2</b>
<b>National Asian American Organizations</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>90.5</b>
Survey answers included collaboration with 1) local and state organizations 2) national aging groups 3) national immigrant groups 4) other national Asian American groups.		

Sense of Effectiveness: Having Voices Heard

Of the national advocates involved in seeking restorations for low-income Asian immigrants, approximately half (50 percent) felt they were successful in their efforts. Those involved felt that the most successful thing that took place was the grassroots campaign at the local and state levels. In fact, almost three-fourths of the respondents interviewed felt that this was the most effective action that resulted from the advocacy of national Asian American organi-

zations. Asian Americans throughout the country with poor, immigrant grandparents felt the issue of policy directly affecting them. Advocates stated that local Asian American communities rose to meet the challenges of welfare reform. Several national Asian American advocates cited examples of communities increasing pushes to help Asian immigrants become naturalized. Many in different ethnic communities were helping seniors learn English and helping them through the naturalization process. In addition, advocacy groups were collecting horror stories and the implications of welfare reform on low-income older immigrants. Many national advocates stated that Republicans felt they had gone too far and that it was a political and moral liability to have starving legal immigrants. One advocate states:

You saw suicides happening in the Asian immigrant community. The picture being painted was distraught individuals, and Congress woke up to that. It happened before the Congressional 1996 election, The Republicans were being seen as anti-immigrant and were taking the backlash. . .the immigrant community realized that these pieces of legislation were driven by Republicans. In turn, immigrants were getting naturalized and were registering Democrats. The Republicans knew in the long run they couldn't afford it.

Another national Asian American advocate insinuates that federal lawmakers were ignorant of how immigrant communities would respond to this issue:

They realized that you can't just attack immigrants without the response from others who are voters. There is a voting segment of the immigrant population that will get upset and this voting sector is getting bigger and bigger. So they need to finesse this better than they have in the past.

National Asian American organizations were successful in educating and networking with others. Organizations felt that the turning point in their advocacy efforts was after the passage of the bill. As word got to Asian immigrant communities, there was panic and fear among the elderly. There were several reports of those who had committed suicide or who had been kicked out of a nursing home. Local and state organizations shared the stories of these elders with national Asian American organizations. Moreover, the media brought stories and voices of elderly immi-

grants who were afraid of losing their financial and medical assistance because of federal welfare reform. Advocates were able to share stories with the press of elderly immigrants vulnerable and legitimately in need of federal assistance. As a result, stories of elders scared and depressed about their potential loss of their SSI checks educated lawmakers on the consequences of their decision. News reports of suicides by elders who feared that they would not be able to survive because they had no other support prompted many local and state individuals and organizations to get involved.

Several national Asian American organizations were successful in getting their older immigrants to DC, as well as involving American-born Asian Americans. As a result, there were older immigrants in DC pleading their case. Advocates were able to demonstrate that these were individuals who played by the rules but who found themselves in circumstances beyond their control and that they were not fraudulent. Advocates discussed how they matter-of-factly presented the implications of the law on low-income elderly immigrants. One national Asian American advocate states that:

We just told their stories. Did we want the elderly and disabled who didn't speak English without any means of subsistence? We were trying to show the tragic picture if we didn't restore SSI. We had elderly people speak up for themselves and we compiled stories for lawmakers.

Lawmakers were coming face-to-face with constituencies that were affected by changes in the law. The faces and voices of older Asian immigrants affected by this bill illustrated the urgency of a re-examination of this legislation.

### Resource Barriers

A major barrier for many national Asian American organizations and advocates on this issue has been resources. The large majority (80 percent) of national Asian American organizations reported budgets under \$1 million; only 20 percent had budgets exceeding that amount. National Asian American organizations expressed that the lack of organizational capacity, in terms of resources, was a major barrier in influencing the debate on welfare reform and elderly immigrants. Although many of their constituents at the local and state level were affected, many felt that there was a lack of resources to do advocacy and collaborations on this

issue. In fact, half of all national Asian American organizations cited this as a barrier to effective advocacy. One respondent states, “Resources, resources. If we had more money and people, we would have a bigger impact.” The lack of resources made it even more difficult to elicit grassroots support and acquire data on welfare and Asian immigrants.

### Generational and Class Factions

Many national Asian American advocates felt the community was divided on the issue. Asian Americans did not want to recognize that people were on welfare in their community, and it became a class issue in terms of trying to elicit grassroots support. Over one-fourth (28 percent) of national Asian American organizations felt that lack of unity among the diverse groups prevented successful advocacy efforts on welfare reform, especially prior to the passage of the bill. One representative of a national Asian American organization states:

A lot of people in the Asian community weren't aware of the level of poverty because of the model minority image and the shame factor and people in our own community who had no real sense of the magnitude of this whole thing and difficulties in getting the whole community to understand what was at stake. A lot of people in our community weren't sympathetic to low-income issues. There is a lot of ethnic, class issues in our community, because those hardest hit were those with the least political resources, which was the Southeast Asian community.

Asian Americans themselves were led to believe that they were a model minority, and many did not feel comfortable acknowledging that there were people on welfare in their community. Middle-class issues like Affirmative Action and Campaign Finance seemed to galvanize the community more than something like welfare reform. Another respondent states, “We have generational factions with our community. With our community, it's hard to have a political identity that is useful. During the welfare reform debates, who did you hear from the Asian American community?”

Moreover, many second-generation advocates suggested that elderly immigrants were not recognized as a voting, powerful, influential constituency. It was even more difficult for these advocates to get their stories told because of their limited English pro-

iciency. "Elderly immigrants are basically viewed as voiceless and powerless. They usually are not to the polls, so it hard to leverage votes." According to national advocates, a beneficial outcome of this law was that it allowed both the American-born and Asian-born to work collectively on this issue. Even though different views between groups occurred, an intergenerational coalition among different age groups and different generations emerged from this law. Second-generation advocates brought voice to this issue through translation services and bringing older Asian immigrants to demonstrations.

### What More Needs To Be Done?

Over the last six years, Congress, the Clinton administration, and the Bush administration have moved to restore some of vital safety nets that the 1996 welfare reform law took from immigrants, including food stamps, Medicaid and Supplemental Security Income. However, legal immigrants who have arrived after the passage of federal welfare reform are eligible for less benefits than those who arrived before the passage of this bill. Recently, the Farm Bill in 2002, signed by President Bush, restored food stamps to immigrants who had been in the U.S. for more than five years and to immigrants receiving disability benefits.

The 1996 federal welfare reform law gave the state the option to provide non-emergency Medicaid to immigrants who were in the U.S. prior to August 22, 1996. Every state except Wyoming has opted to provide Medicaid coverage to immigrants. On the other hand, in May 1999, the federal government also announced that the use of non-cash benefits such as Medicaid by legal immigrants was safe to use and would not negatively impact an immigrant's sponsor, immigration status, or naturalization efforts. Despite these efforts to clarify whether immigrants can or cannot use publicly funded health care, federal policy implementations of welfare reform have created a chilling effect that has discouraged use of Medicaid by immigrants who are legally eligible (Ellwood and Ku 1998). Since the passage of federal welfare reform, several studies have documented how this policy has contributed to a growing unwillingness among low-income immigrants to not only utilize publicly funded health care services, but other types of government assistance (Yoo 1998; Park et al. 2000; Park and Yoo 2001; and Capps et al. 2002). A key concern among immigrants is public charge. Public charge is a term the Immigration and Naturaliza-

tion Service (INS) uses to describe immigrants who either have become or have the possibility of becoming dependent on federal or state government benefits.

Since the implementation of federal welfare reform, there has been confusion and concern in the Asian immigrant community about the use of both public assistance and Medicaid. Immigrants who have arrived after August 22, 1996 are still barred from receiving federal assistance, with the exception of the food stamp program. An opportunity for modifications and clarifications of the federal welfare reform bill and immigrants' eligibility is well timed since the bill is now being slated for reauthorization. To keep this bill in effect, Congress must approve its reauthorization. Federal welfare reform rode on the waves of anti-immigrant hysteria. Moreover, the political climate has changed from immigrants being the problem to homeland security and terrorism as more crisis issues. Lifting the ban on legal immigrants ineligibility to federal safety nets would be the most appropriate and beneficial action the Congress and President Bush could do for the Asian American community. What remains to be seen is how effective national Asian American organizations will be on mobilizing, coalescing, and taking action on the re-examination of this policy.

National Asian American organizations need to be consistently vigilant on the issues that impact low-income Asian Americans. National Asian American organizations cannot work alone—*it must be in concert with the advocacy efforts of local and state organizations, and in coalition with not only with other national Asian American and immigrant organizations, but other national organizations representing diverse constituents.* As demonstrated from this study, the 1996 federal welfare reform law brought many different constituency groups together, which proved quite effective in re-examining the law. Various groups came together to bring the faces and voices of individuals affected by these cutbacks to federal lawmakers.

As illustrated in this study, class and generational divisions within Asian American communities can also influence what is considered important in terms of national advocacy efforts. In the past, policy issues such as Affirmative Action and Campaign Finance Reform have received widespread attention and concern in the Asian American community (Wang 1998; Igasaki 1996) These types of issues have resonated with middle-class, educated, American-born Asians because they represent issues of racial representation, mo-

bility, and political power. With limited resources facing national Asian American organizations, the question is whether the issues of poverty and welfare resonate enough with educated American-born Asians to be on the agenda of not only local and state organizations, but national organizations as well.

## Notes

1. Public assistance income is defined as receiving AFDC, SSI, or state general assistance.
2. The types of staff identified as key informants included the executive director, project coordinator, policy/advocate specialist.

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