

Executive Summary of the First Report of the Vulnerable Workers Project: The Listening Sessions

Background

On October 14, 2009, President Obama established the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (WHIAAPI) through Executive Order 13515. WHIAAPI works to improve the quality of life and opportunities for Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities and strengthens their access to federal programs where AAPIs are underserved. In 2014, the U.S. Departments of Justice and Labor, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and the National Labor Relations Board launched the Vulnerable Workers Project. With WHIAAPI's support, the Project seeks to: 1) gather information about challenges the AAPI workforce faces in high-risk and low-wage industries; 2) educate AAPI communities about their federal employment and labor rights; and 3) utilize the information learned from the sessions to improve the access of vulnerable workers to the agencies. The project also reinforces that there is "No Wrong Door" to access government services: a worker who contacts any of the federal agencies should be provided with culturally appropriate services and, if necessary, referred to the appropriate agency.

While aggregate data on AAPI workers show high rates of employment and above average wages, significant differences exist within the AAPI community with respect to unemployment, employment discrimination, poverty rates and language proficiency. For example, the overall AAPI poverty rate is 13.2 percent, but some AAPI communities have poverty at twice that rate.¹ Additionally, in one Gallup poll, almost one-third of AAPIs surveyed reported incidents of employment discrimination, the largest of any ethnic group.²

Listening Sessions

From August 2014 to June 2015, the agencies held six listening sessions around the country, focused in areas with high numbers of AAPI workers: New York City, Houston, Los Angeles, Washington DC, Minneapolis/St Paul, and Jersey City. With the assistance of local advocates, and in some locations, interpretation services, federal agency representatives met face-to-face with diverse groups of AAPI workers. The listening sessions included workers from several AAPI communities, including East Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian, and Pacific Islander groups.

The listening sessions began with short presentations by each agency, during which the government representatives emphasized their agencies' commitment to be more accessible to AAPI workers and engage with AAPI communities with culturally-competent agency representatives.

Participants were then given the opportunity to ask questions and share concerns with the agency representatives. The attendees at the listening sessions discussed challenges that AAPI workers face in reporting and attempting to address labor and employment problems, including:

¹ 2012 American Community Survey <http://factfinder.census.gov>

² <https://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/aapi/data/critical-issues>

1. Mistrust and skepticism that the government will provide timely and culturally relevant assistance (including language resources) to address concerns;
2. Isolation and limited employment options, sometimes due to immigration status;
3. Vulnerability and exploitation due to lack of information about their rights;
4. Fear of retaliation from employers, as well as their communities; and
5. Frustration around filing complaints, including: not knowing which agency to turn to, complicated instructions, and lengthy wait times to resolve complaints with federal agencies.

Recommendations and Commitments

Following the Vulnerable Workers Project listening sessions, the agencies have begun implementing the following recommendations:

- 1) Expanding language access to assist complainants in understanding and pursuing their federal employment and labor rights;
- 2) Strengthening the “No Wrong Door” approach to filing employment and labor complaints and ensuring accurate referrals of employment and labor matters;
- 3) Improving communication with workers about the status of their complaints;
- 4) Communicating clearly to vulnerable workers that their employment and labor rights are protected regardless of immigration status;
- 5) Translating U and T visa, deferred status, and parole information into AAPI languages;
- 6) Increasing collaboration with state and local agencies;
- 7) More effectively distributing information and resources on workers’ rights targeted to AAPI communities; and
- 8) Committing to continue federal agency engagement, outreach, and follow up with AAPI communities on labor and employment issues.

WHIAAPI and the members of the Vulnerable Workers Project are taking specific actions to implement the recommendations. The Interagency Vulnerable Workers Project plans to incorporate lessons learned, best practices, and new initiatives into each federal agency’s operations to better serve AAPI communities across the country.

To view the full, 17-page report, please visit:

<http://www.dol.gov/sec/media/reports/20150514-AAPI.pdf>

To learn more about the Vulnerable Workers Project, please visit: _____ or email _____