

Improving Cultural Competency: Smart Strategies for Working with Filipinos

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Issue:

The issues and concerns in the Filipino community are best illustrated in the following “WE BELIEVE STATEMENTS” by the Maui Filipino Working Group comprised of Jeny Bissell, Virginia Cantorna, Kim Compoc and Cornelia Soberano.

We believe that pride in one’s culture and identity is important for everyone, from youth to seniors. We believe that culture should be celebrated, not pathologized.

We believe language and cultural interpretation are crucial to affording true access to services. Interpreters must be certified, and use ordinary language to communicate with a wide variety of reading levels.

We believe a person’s language and accent do not reflect one’s intelligence or capabilities.

We believe that everyone deserves respect and dignity. We believe in strengths-based services for all people.

We believe that stereotypes are hurtful. We believe that racism must end, along with all other forms of oppression. As Hawaii is a multicultural society, we believe we must break out from our own stereotypes we have developed against others.

We believe that Filipinos should be recognized as a diverse community, especially with regard to geography, language group, immigration status, educational achievement, gender, class, sexual orientation and other factors.

We believe in family-centered, culturally competent services. While there is no recipe in how to interact with all Filipinos, we believe that through careful study and reflection service providers can improve skills.

One of the primary concerns is that Filipinos are not accessing services and that there is a provisional need for culturally appropriate services in the Filipino community.

Intervention:

In August 2007, the Hawai’i State Department of Health Maui Family Health Services Division (FHSD) partnered with the Maui Filipino Working Group to

coordinate and organize a workshop on Maui entitled, “Filipino Cultural Competency: Smart Strategies for working with Filipinos.” The objectives of the workshop were to: 1) Acquire tools for effective delivery of services to a diverse Filipino community. 2) Improve understanding of the socioeconomic, educational, mental health, substance use and psycho-physiological factors which may affect the health and well-being of the Filipino community; and 3) Gain a better understanding of the Filipino historical background and cultural value systems.

The workshop was funded and sponsored by the Hawaii People’s Fund: “Change, Not Charity.”, the Department of Education English Language Learning Program, the County of Maui Mayor’s Office on Economic Development, and the National Federation of Filipino American Association Region XII.

At the beginning of the workshop, Virgilio Felipe, a historian and author of “Hawaii” A Pilipino Dream,” said “Language is the DNA of culture, “ setting the foundation for the other presenters. These speakers included Dr. Marconi Dioso, retired Maui Filipino Physician, military historian, and the author of “A Trilogy of Wars.” This book recounts, with a high level of detail the period from 1896 to 1902, when the Philippines fought the Spanish, then the Americans, losing hundreds of thousands of Filipino civilians, in the hopes of gaining independence. Cornelia Soberano, Toronto Lawyer, then spoke of the need for awareness of Filipino cultural values. Dr. Virginia Cantorna, Clinical Psychologist from the Hawai’i State Department of Education (DOE) on Maui, presented on stages of acculturation, and cultural sensitivity versus cultural competency. Dr. Amy Agbayani, Professor of Political Science at the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa opined that the school system has been unable to fully meet the needs of its Filipino students. Many of the speakers shared from the experiences of their own families, such as when Jeny Bissell, FHSD Coordinator on Maui, presented Filipino health and disease statistics. She expanded on these data by including a photo of her extended family when they first arrived in Hawai’i. The topic of language interpretation was emphasized throughout the day, perhaps most eloquently in the two skits which were presented by “Talking Stories”, which Kim Compoc, Executive Director of the Maui Mediation Services wrote and directed.

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Impact:

Two hundred workshop attendees filled the Kahili Golf Club Conference Room. The DOE comprised 30% of the workshop audience. Further, an estimated one-third of the audience was Filipino while two-thirds was non-Filipino. The audience of the workshop comprised 30% from the DOE. Also represented were dozens of health and social service agencies across the state, including several non-profit Executive Directors, Dept. of Health personnel, lawyers, judiciary staff, activists, artists and academics. Further, the audience estimated to be approximately one third Filipino and two-thirds non-Filipino. At the end of the workshop, the audience was invited to come to the microphone with questions or comments. Some of the participants spoke through tears about how meaningful the day had been for them. Several participants spoke to how the information and knowledge learned from the workshop could actually be used to improve their practice in their respective organizations. They all spoke, in one way or another, about their own “debt or gratitude.” Other comments from participants include, “17 years I’ve been on Lāna‘i. This is the first workshop on Filipinos I’ve ever heard about.” Other participants added that, it’s so inspiring because this is a workshop about Filipinos and all the leadership is Filipino. That’s really saying something.” Another workshop member related, “what they have done is welcome us in to to show us who they are. This is beautiful.”

Dr. Cantorna reminds all that the workshop was simply an invitation for service providers and the Filipino community to open their eyes to the problems facing the community. However, cultural competency means not just being sensitive or aware. It means making a commitment to change. In her writing, she adds, “[f]our women can’t do it alone. A variety of approaches, resources and community inputs are needed to continue to create effective change and positive growth. Growing support in the form of financial resources, vision and manpower is needed.” Dr. Agbayani wrote, “I want to take this opportunity to commend the Filipino Working Group for their vision and hard work. It is obvious to me and all those present at the workshop that many valuable lessons were learned and should help improve attitudes and services for Filipinos, a large and growing segment of Maui and the State.”

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