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Community center planned for Asian Indian population

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The state's first Asian Indian legislator and a leading social service activist are working to establish a community center to help New Jersey's burgeoning Asian population

Assemblyman Upendra Chivukula said he and Jagdish Vasudev, founder of the New Americans program at the United Way of Central Jersey, envisioned creating a center where Asian immigrants can get health screenings, information on social service programs, counseling and other help.

Chivukula, a former Franklin mayor, said there needs to be a focal point where the Asian community can access services. He said Gov. Jon Corzine recognized the need when he revitalized the state's ethnic advisory council.

Vasudev and the state lawmaker hope to model the Asian center after the Puerto Rican Action Board, based in New Brunswick, and the Puerto Rican Association for Human Development Inc., in Perth Amboy, which was established to help the Hispanic population.

"There are tremendous resources available. If we put together a credible organization the funding will come," said Vasudev.

While they haven't selected a location for the center, they would prefer to see it in one of the communities that has a large Asian Indian population, such as South Brunswick or Edison.

A former banker, Vasudev emerged as a point person to whom many in the Asian community turn when they need help navigating through the social service network.

When the family of a highly educated, young Asian Indian woman recently feared she was being abused they went to him. He was also asked to intervene when another young mother faced financial ruin when her husband deserted her, fleeing back to India with all the profits from their business.

Vasudev put the abused woman in touch with a shelter and he found financial counseling for the other.

"If you call me and you need something I will respond," said the 64-year-old, who left the corporate world five years ago and began a second career in social services.

In 2003 he founded the "New Americans" program at the United Way of Central Jersey, which is based in Milltown. His goal is simply to help immigrants become self-sufficient economically and contribute to the community's well-being.

While the program reaches out to all immigrants, in Middlesex County its primary focus is on the burgeoning Asian Indian population. Vasudev emphasized the 2000 U.S. Census showed one out of every five people in Central Jersey is an immigrant. Since 1990 the immigrant population increased more than 93 percent. South Brunswick and Edison are two towns that have the largest concentrations of Asian immigrants.

Overall, there was a 12 percent growth in the region's population, but it is dwarfed by the explosion in the Asian population, where the increase registered 113 percent, Vasudev said. Like any immigrant community, Vasudev said Asians face problems.

What worries him is the reluctance within the culture to ask for help.

"I try to tell people to speak out," said Vasudev, who came to the United States in 1970 when he left his native Mumbai, formerly known as Bombay.

"There is nothing wrong with saying 'I need help'," Vasudev said, explaining the biggest hurdle he must overcome is the stigma which the culture attaches to the request for help.

One of the first goals of the New American program was to produce a resource handbook that lists all the agencies. The book is now available through the county. A second edition, printed in Spanish by Middlesex County with an introduction signed by Freeholder Blanca Valenti, was released earlier this year.

During the summer Vasudev also organized a two-day seminar on social services needs in the Asian community. Speakers discussed health issues and financial questions facing the community.

Chivukula and Vasudev said a community center would be the next step in the evolution of social services for the community. "It would be a great step," the assemblyman said.

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