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COMMUNITY NEWS

Old people at home will get vaccinated, but maybe not their caregivers, state announces

By Mahlon Meyer
NORTHWEST ASIAN WEEKLY

Last week, in a stunning turnabout, Washington state officials said they would vaccinate all people over 70 early this year. The announcement, on Jan. 6, came within days after a coalition of over 200 individuals and organizations representing communities of color asked the state to vaccinate multigenerational households in which older people are cared for at home.

“WE DID IT!! (mostly...)” Trang Tu, the organizer of the coalition, wrote to its members the day of the announcement. At press time, however, some worried that, despite the change, disorder in distributing the vaccine could favor those with connections and privilege.

Moreover, the state’s new policy neglects the coalition’s other request: that all caregivers in such households be vaccinated as well.

Under the new policy, all adults over 50 would also be vaccinated in the second tier, known as 1b. But in many multigenerational households, it is younger caregivers that provide much, if not all, of the care.

Tu, for instance, at 48, is not covered under the new state guidelines. She is her 90-year-old mother’s sole caregiver. Every day, she spoon feeds her mother, bathes her with a sponge, and lifts her in and out of bed. Tu, who has undergraduate and graduate degrees from Harvard, sings Vietnamese and French songs with her, which her mother taught her in childhood. Her mother, who is stricken with dementia, can no longer remember the words, but hums along. Sometimes she chants mindlessly. Tu’s wrists have become injured from gently holding her mother’s hands as she guides her around the room.

She has been caring for her mother full-time for six

years. Before COVID-19 hit, she had occasional visits from siblings, who would help out. But now she takes care of her mother on her own from 8 a.m. until midnight. The rest of the time, she has a baby monitor, a small screen attached to a camera, so she can remotely view her mother.

The rapid turnaround in the state’s policy came as somewhat of a surprise, even to Tu, who has been advocating for over a month, ever since she heard that the state and the federal government would vaccinate older people living in nursing homes and low-income housing first. Such a schedule would have neglected people such as her mother for up to a year until all essential workers were vaccinated first.

But the state’s announcement showed responsiveness to the issues she raised in a letter written to Gov. Jay Inslee and Secretary of Health Umair Shah late last month.

In an email, Tu said she was particularly heartened by comments made by Assistant Health Secretary Michelle Roberts.

“We also really wanted to look at those multi-generational households, especially families caring for elders in their home. That was really an inequity in 1a, just focusing on vaccination to people in long-term care facilities,” said Roberts, referring to the first part of the first round of vaccines. Her remarks came during a press conference on Jan. 6, when the state announced the changed guidelines.

“We know many families take care of elders in their homes and we want to make sure we are reaching those families as well, to protect those most at risk. That is an input we’ve heard from the community and an example of how we are using community input to guide our decisions,” said Roberts.

King County last week also announced it would allot \$7 million to set up two vaccination sites “likely” in South

King County and assemble mobile vaccination teams for homebound elders. More details were not immediately forthcoming.

The announcements may have quelled a great deal of despair across communities of color in the state.

Before the policy change was announced, many leaders of Asian American and other traditionally marginalized communities saw the neglect as yet another oversight in a system that has overlooked their particular cultural and economic realities.

“Responsible administrators have not taken appropriate effort or time to understand and properly prioritize the fair distribution of medically related support for the various unique cultural situations, especially related to dependent elders in home/family care,” Tomio Moriguchi, one of the founders of the Keiro long-term care community, wrote state leaders, before the announcement.

Rep. My-Linh Thai, the first refugee elected to the state legislature, said that, like Tu, she had cared for her mother, in her case, when she had cancer, along with her husband’s grandmother, who had dementia. But she was grateful for Tu for reminding her, in the onslaught of the pandemic, of the need to support multigenerational families.

“The system wanted to find the most efficient way, but it was not built with people like Trang’s family in mind,” she said in an interview.

But Asian Americans make up almost 8% of the population of Washington state. Latinos make up about 12% and Blacks 4%. These communities, along with other communities of color, immigrants, and refugees, often care for their elders at home.

Besides, such statistics do not reflect economic

see **VACCINES** on 11

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■ ASTROLOGY


Predictions and advice for the week of January 16–22, 2021


By Sun Lee Chang


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Rat—While you are not interested in making change for change's sake, do occasionally consider leaving your comfort zone.
- 


Dragon—Although it might feel quite the opposite, you actually have more leverage in the current situation than you think.
- 


Monkey—Are you tempted to go all in on a whim? A good night's sleep could cause you to reconsider.
- 


Ox—Doing the right thing has its own rewards. Rather than looking for outside affirmation, look within.
- 


Snake—Do you and your partner agree on the goal, but not on how to accomplish it? Additional conversation is warranted.
- 


Rooster—Trying to choose between two different interests? Combining the two would allow you to get the best of both worlds.
- 

Tiger—Once your priorities are clear, the rest will fall in line. Progress should follow where it had once been stalled.
- 

Horse—Don't let your expectations lag behind reality. Meaningful steps forward begin with being honest with yourself.
- 

Dog—Staying quiet is not the best strategy for getting what you want. Sometimes you have to ask for it.
- 

Rabbit —You can't fit in all that you want. Once you acknowledge that, decide what is most important to you.
- 

Goat—Have you been debating whether to try something new? The risk is low and the reward could be quite high.
- 

Pig—With some persistence, you should be able to make a few inroads into what once seemed impassable.

WHAT'S YOUR ANIMAL SIGN?

RAT 1912, 1924, 1936, 1948, 1960, 1972, 1984, 1996, 2008, 2020 OX 1913, 1925, 1937, 1949, 1961, 1973, 1985, 1997, 2009, 2021 TIGER 1914, 1926, 1938, 1950, 1962, 1974, 1986, 1998, 2010 RABBIT 1915, 1927, 1939, 1951, 1963, 1975, 1987, 1999, 2011 DRAGON 1916, 1928, 1940, 1952, 1964, 1976, 1988, 2000, 2012 SNAKE 1917, 1929, 1941, 1953, 1965, 1977, 1989, 2001, 2013 HORSE 1918, 1930, 1942, 1954, 1966, 1978, 1990, 2002, 2014 GOAT 1919, 1931, 1943, 1955, 1967, 1979, 1991, 2003, 2015 MONKEY 1920, 1932, 1944, 1956, 1968, 1980, 1992, 2004, 2016 ROOSTER 1921, 1933, 1945, 1957, 1969, 1981, 1993, 2005, 2017 DOG 1922, 1934, 1946, 1958, 1970, 1982, 1994, 2006, 2018 PIG 1923, 1935, 1947, 1959, 1971, 1983, 1995, 2007, 2019

*The year ends on the first new moon of the following year. For those born in January and February, please take care when determining your sign.

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disparities, since lower income families of any ethnicity can often not afford long-term care facilities.

Meanwhile, the situation here reflects national trends.

In her letter, Tu cited the National Asian Pacific Center on Aging, which found that 42% of Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) are caregivers, compared with 22% of the general population.

Such a practice is reflected in the experience of the International Community Health Service (ICHS) in Seattle, which had over 140,000 visits and 460,000 health encounters, including educational outreach, last year.

Over 50% of the patients needed interpreting in over 50 languages, and most are API, East African, Eastern European and Latino, according to Teresita Batayola, president and CEO of ICHS.

Rimi Afroze, program manager of the Aging and Disability Services of Neighborhood House, said the mainstream healthcare system has long overlooked the particular needs of immigrant, refugee, and marginalized populations.

During the pandemic, she “faced huge roadblocks” in trying to find culturally appropriate support for homebound elders who were becoming increasingly depressed and anxious, such as home delivered food that they could eat or online support groups in their languages.

“We are following a ‘one prescription to treat all’ strategy,” she said. “This cannot help communities of color.”

Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of Asia Lor, 24, a second-generation Hmong immigrant who is taking care of her grandmother, a cancer survivor, at home. Because of her age, she is not eligible for a vaccine in the first tier of the state’s guidelines, and may have to wait up to a year.

Of the 2,400 Hmong people who live in Washington state, 100% take care of their elders at home, said Cynthia Yongvang, executive director of the Hmong Association of Washington.

“It was drilled into us from the day we were born that it is our responsibility to take care of our elders until the day they die,” said Yongvang, in an interview.

Even if families decided to place their elders in congregate care, and could afford it, such places would probably not cater to their particular linguistic, cultural, and dietary needs.

“Our elders don’t thrive in mainstream nursing homes, especially in places that are not culturally supportive,” said state Rep. Sharon Tomiko Santos, in an interview.

For Tu, this has meant years of finding bright spots among her mother’s decline. Years earlier, she took her mother to their garden, to paint, then to Goodwill to find matching frames.

She began to keep a blog to help her sort through challenging moments. One day, she found her mother hallucinating as if she were still the caregiver, talking to her children.

“Gently, she asked if we were tired. She kept telling us to go ahead and rest, sleep. She said she’d just lie over here, and we could lie over there, next to her. She asked what we wanted to eat, and she said, ‘Tell me and I’ll make it.’ She said our dad would be home soon,” Tu wrote.

Tu’s dad had been dead for decades.

Three years ago, her mother, with tears in her eyes, suddenly said, “I don’t know who I am.”

Now she mostly chants or sings aimlessly, in a wandering, tired, and sometimes distraught voice. ■

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Sam Park

runoff election held on Jan. 5 for the two senate seats. “The Asian American community has blossomed,” said Sam Park, a member of the Georgia State House of Representatives. “Asian Americans are the fastest growing population in Georgia next to Hispanics.”

Park worked with many Asian American Pacific Islander groups to get out the vote for Democrats. “We saw the fruit of all of their hard work and saw a surge of Asian American voters, particularly young, 18-29 years old, that helped flip the state for Biden.”

The senate seats were ‘too close to call,’ which necessitated a runoff. By state rule, no candidate can advance through a primary or a general election system without first earning more than 50% of the votes. If no one does, the top two vote getters advance to a runoff election.



Jon Ossoff

Democrat Jon Ossoff faced Republican David Perdue in one contest, and Democrat Raphael Warnock and Republican Kelly Loeffler vied for the other seat. With the senate in favor of the Republicans by a slim 51-49 margin, a win by the Democrats would reverse the

margin. A win for Republicans would keep the status quo. A split would have each party equal, although the Vice President breaks any deadlocks in votes.

“I think it mattered,” said Matsukawa of the handwritten notes to prospective voters and subsequent victories.



Gary Tang

As a former member of the Asian Counseling and Referral Service, Gary Tang helped with voter registration. He also helped immigrant populations navigate the voting process and some asked him if voting would make a difference. Obviously, it does. He felt

compelled to help this year with the fall election. As part of the Progressive Turnout Project, Tang and his partner volunteered to handwrite postcards to prospective voters.

“We sent out 200 postcards to Wisconsin,” said Tang. The state was one of several that were determined to be a ‘battleground state’ that could go either in favor of the incumbent Donald Trump or Joe Biden. As a volunteer, Tang was given a mailing list across all ethnic groups. “We understood that with handwritten cards, voters would be motivated to go out and vote.”

“I usually am quite impatient about writing like everyone else,” said Tang jokingly about the effort to write out the messages. “We are all used to texts.”

The postcards were free, and volunteers like Tang paid for the postage to send to prospective voters. The notes were pre-scripted messages which urged registered voters to get out and vote.

Tang wrote another 100 postcards before Christmas in an effort to get out the vote for the runoff in Georgia.

The night of the runoff election in Georgia, Tang was worried about the outcome.

“I worried about the results,” Tang recalled as he went to bed with the election results too close to call. “I woke up at 4 a.m. and said, ‘Oh my goodness,’ as Tang saw the results showed that Warnock had won his U.S. Senate runoff against the incumbent Loeffler. Later that day, news outlets called the second race for Ossoff.

In the end, the state of Georgia elected the Democratic candidates to the U.S. Senate thanks in part to the grassroots efforts of making sure that people got out and voted.

“I am so delighted,” said Matsukawa. “I really felt we had to give the Biden-Harris administration the best shot for success.” With the win, the U.S. Senate will be controlled by the Democrats. The party holds the advantage in Congress, Senate, and the newly elected president.

Perhaps the new lawmakers will help make a difference, especially with the events that transpired on Jan. 6. The scenes of hordes of Trump supporters terrorizing the U.S. Capitol shocked people from around the world.

“I was horrified at what I saw,” said Matsukawa. “It was an attack on our democracy.” The riots at the U.S. Capitol was another failed effort by the Trump administration and its supporters to overturn the November election results, this time, through terroristic means.

Matsukawa said, “January 20th can’t come soon enough.” ■

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