

# HEALTH through ACTION



## HOUSTON—Asian American Health Coalition

Houston is rich in resources—a hub of industry, foreign trade, education, and medicine—and home to a population diverse in terms of language, culture, and national origin. The largest city in Texas and the fourth most-populous in the nation, Houston has the third-largest Asian American population in the country. In Houston’s Harris County, where most Asian Americans in Texas live, 30% of residents lack health insurance, and Asians face numerous barriers to accessing health care. Of the 15,000 Asians who evacuated the Gulf Coast in 2005 to escape Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, more than half remain in Houston. They, as well as Asian Americans who do not read or speak English, have limited knowledge of Western medicine-based health resources. As a result, health disparities persist, especially in rates of cancer and Hepatitis B.

### EMPHASIS ON CANCER, HEALTH PROMOTION, AND DISEASE PREVENTION

The Asian American Health Coalition of Greater Houston—HOPE Clinic is the lead organization for the Houston Health Through Action (HTA) project.\* The project has at its core a coalition of

**People from China and Vietnam make up 52% of the Houston area’s Asian American population.**

six Asian American community-based organizations, as well as affiliations with 24 additional agencies. Together, these organizations serve a significant portion of the area’s

diverse Asian American population. Coalition members range from local health departments and hospitals to grassroots, ethnic-specific agencies that can reach out to the Vietnamese, Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, Korean, and other Asian communities in and

around Houston. HOPE Clinic provides a health care safety net for these populations, with full Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) status pending.

“As a community health center, we partner with many organizations and have the capacity to lead—to coordinate workshops, sponsor support groups, conduct health awareness and education campaigns, and hold community events,” said Shane Chen, HOPE Clinic’s Director of Capacity Development and the HTA project director. “We are the one-stop source for anyone who needs to reach out to the Asian community, whether it is for a focus group, to do health research, or to conduct a health promotion campaign.”

Photos (l to r): Shane Chen, HTA Project Director, © Adam Stoltman/APIAHF; medical consultation, © Bruce Bennett; lanterns, © Christine Stephens; pilates class, © Bruce Bennett.

**A PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM FUNDED BY WK KELLOGG FOUNDATION  
TO CLOSE HEALTH GAPS FOR ASIAN AMERICANS, NATIVE HAWAIIANS AND PACIFIC ISLANDERS**

## THE HEPATITIS B RATE FOR ASIAN AMERICANS IN HOUSTON IS 23 TIMES HIGHER THAN THAT FOR WHITES. THE LIVER CANCER RATE IS MORE THAN TWICE THAT OF WHITES.

The Coalition recently received funding from the Cancer Prevention and Research Institute of Texas to increase outreach efforts in the Asian American community—including expanding a mobile mammography screening program and developing cervical cancer awareness among Vietnamese American women. “We are proud to be one of the few community-based organizations—not a hospital, institution, or medical school—to receive funding under this state initiative,” said Chen.

Treating cancer patients poses challenges, due to the cultural differences among the various ethnicities. For example, “Chinese and Indian cultures, while both Asian, are very different,” said Chen, explaining that, in the Indian culture, a woman will hide that she has breast cancer, because she does not want knowledge of her illness to hurt her daughter’s chance of marriage. In the Chinese culture, the stigma of cancer is slowly receding and being replaced by survivor pride. “When a woman is able to step forward as a breast cancer survivor, she can help support others in her community.”

### SCREENING AND TREATING HEPATITIS B

As in other parts of the country, Asian Americans in Houston are disproportionately infected with the Hepatitis B virus. In a partnership with the Houston Department of Health and Human Services, the Coalition launched a Hepatitis B screening program. At eight events held over six months—reaching into Vietnamese, Korean, South Asian, and Chinese communities—more than 700 people were tested for the virus. For those whose tests were negative, HOPE Clinic followed up with donated vaccinations (a series of three shots), offered at low or no cost, in order to prevent future infections.

Screenings are especially important, because many Asian Americans are unaware that they are infected with Hepatitis B and may unknowingly transmit it. Chen related the story of a 20-year-old college student from China who did not know she had the virus until she came to HOPE Clinic. “She couldn’t afford \$800 a month for medicine, so she stopped taking it, which is very risky. She had applied for medication assistance as *underinsured* not *uninsured*, which she was.” This illustrates another important role for the clinic: “She needed help navigating the health system. Once the error was corrected, she was eligible for free medication,” said Chen.

### BUILDING CAPACITY TO REDUCE HEALTH DISPARITIES

The HTA project has helped Coalition members improve the services they provide to their clients and patients. “Ultimately,” said Chen, “we strengthened our own capacity so that the products we deliver—whether it’s health navigation, disease-

specific screening programs, community events related to preventive care, or social services—can help reduce health disparities.

“We don’t have the staff to do everything ourselves, so we work with and encourage others to be our community partners,” said Chen. “When we receive funding, we serve as the umbrella for smaller agencies, which helps them do all they are capable of doing. They become our advocates, and we can turn to them when we need grassroots help with a major initiative.”

### COALITION PARTNERS ARE: (CORE MEMBERS IN BOLD)

- **Asian American Health Coalition**
- **Asian American Family Services**
- American Cancer Society-Houston Metro Market
- **Asian Cancer Council**
- Asian Pacific American Medical Student Association—Baylor College of Medicine
- Asian Senior Coalition
- Boat People SOS
- Breast Cancer Network of Strength
- Center for Research on Minority Health, M.D. Anderson Cancer Center
- **Chinese Community Center**
- Filipino Cancer Network of America—Metropolitan Houston
- Filipino Doctors & Nurses Association
- Gateway to Care
- Harris County Healthcare Alliance
- Herald Cancer Association—Houston
- Houston Korean Nurses Association
- Ibn Sina Foundation Clinic
- Indian American Cancer Network
- **Light & Salt Association**
- Polynesian Cultural Association—Houston
- Sam Houston State University, Sociology Dept.
- Shifa Clinic
- Taiwanese Heritage Society
- Texas Children’s Hospital, Division of Gastroenterology, Hepatology, and Nutrition
- Texas Liver Coalition
- Tzu Chi Medical Team
- University of Texas School of Biomedical Informatics
- Vietnamese American Medical Association
- Vietnamese Cancer Support Group
- **VN Teamwork**

\* The project coalition, led by the Asian American Health Coalition-HOPE Clinic, is one of eight coalitions in the four-year, \$16.5-million Health Through Action national program funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and developed in partnership with the Asian and Pacific Islander American Health Forum.

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