

## **New York's Immigrants in the Aftermath of 9/11**

by Mikki Baloy, LDRNY Coordinator

The impact of September 11 on the immigrant communities in New York City has been startling and underreported. Many newcomers to the US are at risk of falling through the cracks of the recovery effort, or off the radar of those who might be able to assist them, because of their status or language barriers. In the wake of disaster, these people are doubly victimized. The whole country, and indeed the international community, was bereft after 9/11, but among the most vulnerable help seemed far away. Disasters disproportionately affect low-income or marginalized people who can least withstand the stress and financial reality. LDRNY, in partnership with the New Life Center, LFCS, NYDIS, the Metropolitan Synod, and the Atlantic District would like to share stories of struggle and renewal from immigrant communities making lives for themselves after September 11.

Manhattan's Chinatown is located in the shadow of the World Trade Center, both literally and figuratively. In the three months following 9/11, one in four Chinese immigrants (or roughly 8000 workers) lost his/her job; this in a community that was already one of the poorest in the city. People from the Fujian province of China speak their own dialect, and as such are chronically underserved by the many organizations that would provide assistance after a disaster: most literature is written in Cantonese or Mandarin. Additionally, many Fujianese are undocumented immigrants, having paid \$30,000 to \$50,000 to be smuggled here illegally. Many are still in debt to the "snakeheads," or smugglers, who brought them to this country.

Three years after 9/11, families in Chinatown are still facing fears about deportation, the inability to sponsor loved ones' immigration to the US, and the mental and physical health of themselves and their children, since the air quality was not much different there than in Lower Manhattan. In fact, there has been a 67% rise in the number of children in a Chinatown asthma program subsequent to the attacks.

School guidance counselors are still referring children of Chinese immigrants to the New Life Center as educators are noting increasing incidences of truancy, based in large part in children's confusion and anxiety in the wake of 9/11. Language difficulties exacerbate this feeling of confusion; public schools offer bi-lingual classes, but they are taught in Mandarin. Many youths saw their dreams of opportunity in America shattered with the collapse of the Twin Towers, a recognizable symbol of prosperity and promise. That they saw it from the vantage point of their own homes and schools was that much more traumatic. The New Life Center continues to aid families with ESL classes and after-school programs, legal assistance, referrals to social service agencies, and mental health counseling, and is the only agency specifically devoted to the needs of Fujianese-speaking people.

Regardless of immigration status, the Unmet Needs Roundtable provides direct financial assistance to clients based on the casework of service providers. Donors at the table, like LDRNY, hear countless stories about 9/11-affected immigrants who continue trying to make ends meet in America. An attorney from Lutheran Family and Community Services, funded by LDRNY, is an advisor at the Table, providing information about employment or public benefits eligibility, asylum claims, and adjustment of status. LFCS attorneys offer an alternative to the non-lawyer “practitioners” that claim to help immigrants with their status. These “practitioners” often charge exorbitant fees and are not qualified to navigate the complex system of immigration law.

Too many non-citizens are taken advantage of with poor legal advice and inflated charges. One such person was a former Windows on the World employee who had suffered the loss of nearly 300 co-workers and the loss of her job. She had consulted with a “practitioner” who did not offer any immediate relief, but billed her more than she could reasonably afford. A caseworker from Lutheran Social Services’ Project LIFE referred her to LFCS attorneys, who helped her to get her green card and permanent resident status. She is also an integral member of ROC-NY, a group of restaurant workers displaced by 9/11 that advocates for fair treatment of food-service industry employees (many of whom are un- or under-documented immigrants).

Attorneys from Lutheran Family and Community Services have shared other successes. They prevented the deportation proceedings against a terminally ill client who had been detained after the Special Registration, a Homeland Security program that targeted men from certain countries in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Africa. No such program existed before 9/11. LFCS has represented approximately 30 Special Registrants, some of whom were eligible for lawful permanent resident status and would otherwise have been deported.

Caseworkers from several social service agencies have presented a myriad of client needs since the inception of the Unmet Needs Roundtable in 2002. The most common needs are rent, food, and utilities. For un- or underdocumented immigrants, the faith community is a safety net when all other aid is out of reach. A Bangladeshi woman with two small children was facing eviction and other financial problems since the detention of her Pakistani husband. He went to the Special Registration required for many immigrants since the passage of the new BICS laws, was subsequently detained, and has been imprisoned for over a year. He has elected to be deported rather than face more time in prison. He will return to Pakistan voluntarily and will not be allowed to enter the US for ten years. Because his wife is from a different ethnic background, she will not be joining him. The younger child, a boy, will go with his father, leaving the wife and daughter behind in America. This forced separation may destroy this young family. LDRNY provided Metrocards so that the client could travel to and from her new job, as well as some legal fees for her and her husband. She is hoping to acquire a greencard. LDRNY was pleased to provide assistance to these families as they recover from the hardships they have faced.

An Arab-American mother of three lost her job embroidering traditional Arab dresses as a result of post-9/11 prejudices. The shop where she worked went out of business, and she was afraid to leave her home because of threats of hate crimes and harassment. Because her husband is disabled, she is the primary wage earner in the household. The family faced poverty and eviction until she was able to find work as a babysitter and language teacher. While she still earns less today than she did before September 11, she is relieved to be able to work again.

Racial bias affects even the churches in New York. Salaam Arabic Lutheran Church in Brooklyn offered ESL classes to the community prior to 9/11. Right after the attacks, Pastor El-Yateem posted a sign stating that classes would be cancelled for a time. The sign was in Arabic. Someone who couldn't read it broke the windows of the church, apparently believing that it was a mosque, or somehow affiliated with terrorists. This backlash might help to explain why many immigrants, particularly some of the 600,000 Muslims in the New York City area, were afraid to come forward to receive disaster assistance, and thus may not have recovered as quickly from their economic situations as their naturalized counterparts.

Hispanic communities have felt the wave effects of 9/11, as well. The Atlantic District's Hugo Berger works with the Hispanic community in Inwood. Two people in his congregation attempted suicide because of the effects of 9/11, and many more are depressed. Mental health problems are exacerbated by separation from family and friends who remain in Latin America, and the inability to stabilize households without lucrative employment. The Loving Care Group, food pantries, and ESL classes have helped to alleviate the burden on immigrant families. Hugo estimates that 60 people per week come to the St. Matthew's food pantry, which began after 9/11.

In recent months, Mt. Sinai's WTC Health Effects Treatment Program has presented cases at the Unmet Needs Roundtable. Mt. Sinai estimates that 40% of the 10,000 people screened for Ground Zero-related health problems are foreign-born. Caseworkers from the hospital have advocated on behalf of their clients, former recovery and asbestos abatement workers, and predominantly Hispanic immigrants. Many of these clients from South and Central America worked cleaning buildings in Lower Manhattan for months after the attacks. Their subsequent health problems include sinusitis, GERD, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, and chronic rhinitis. Several are partially or completely disabled, and of those with legal status who seek Workers' Compensation or SSI/SSD, most have received only minimal assistance in the past few years because of backlogs and red-tape in the system. Those Hispanic recovery workers who are undocumented are ineligible for any federal aid, and turn to the faith community for guidance and basic needs.

Pastor James Nauhn, from the African Immigrant Ministry of Staten Island and Queens (LCMS), told us his church had lost perhaps 20 congregants to relocation because of 9-11 related economic hardships. He mentioned one entire 15-member family that moved to Philadelphia to find work; joblessness in the community seems to be a problem even now, three years after many lost their employment in Manhattan. Lutheran Social

Services' Project LIFE helped two families from his church, both with school-aged children, to acquire food stamps and affordable housing and helped to keep other parishioners in the city by connecting them with local resources.

Large groups of West African refugees are also coming to Pastor Nauhn's church at present, looking to the church for guidance on many issues. The immigration process in America has changed drastically in the past two and a half years. For example, the prior six-month wait for a green card could now take up to three years because of new security restrictions. James has been a touchstone for many West African immigrants who need assistance in this arena, acting as both advocate and interpreter.

Immigrants' fears of deportation are not unfounded. The New York Times reported on October 11, 2004 that the "Department of Homeland Security enforces 1996 immigration restrictions with new vigor" since September 11<sup>th</sup>, and that "noncitizens are being deported in record numbers." The citizenship process, and even the protocol for obtaining a green card, is lengthy and fraught with the potential for mistakes and oversight. As New York City continues to recover from the worst economic disaster in our history, many immigrants face untold challenges as language barriers and bureaucracy compound the grief that the entire city continues to feel. Immigrants were no less emotionally affected, but have had fewer resources for recovery.

LDRNY and our partners are committed to extending a helping hand to all those who were affected by 9/11, and we will do so regardless of status or race. It is our belief that all human beings are equal and entitled to the compassionate aid of the church. We will continue to seek out and lift up those among us who are the least, the last, and the lost.