



Policy Briefing on Workforce Development and Employment for the Asian Pacific Minnesotan Community

Prepared for the 2011 MN Legislative Session by the Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans

Introduction

In 2009, Asian Minnesotans had a 7.9% annual unemployment rate compared to 7.1% for whites in Minnesotans.¹ While the unemployment rate seems moderate in comparison, the combined category of “Asian” masks the true unemployment levels within the Asian Minnesotan community. Data from the 2006-2008 American Communities Survey reveal that that Hmong population, which is the most populous Asian ethnic group in Minnesota, had higher unemployment levels than the Indian (Asian), Chinese, and Vietnamese in Minnesota (see figure 1). As expected, each group’s educational attainment levels strongly correlated with their respective unemployment levels.

Although more current ACS data on unemployment is not available, the Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans has received reports from community members that suggest unemployment levels are higher than 7.9% for certain Asian ethnic groups and unemployment has fallen especially hard on the untrained, unskilled, and older community members. Jobs that employ unskilled workers have largely been lost to globalization and a new strategy is needed to ensure full integration by new Americans and better use of this valuable labor pool.

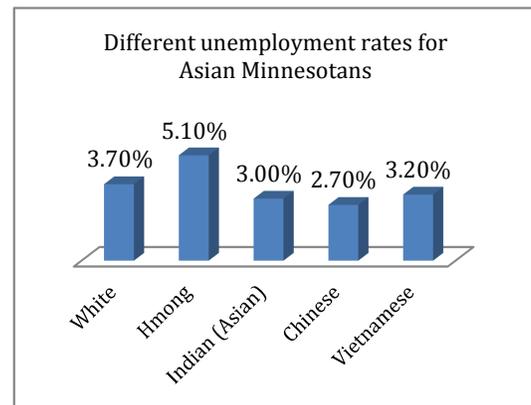


Figure 1 - Data from 2006-2008 ACS

“A Ladder into Integration”

Policy Recommendations to Improve Asian Minnesotan’s Access to the Labor Market

Employment and education remain to be important in the integration process of new Americans. Access to the labor markets, access to English language courses, and educational access continue to constitute the most important goals for the Asian Minnesotan community. Above all, community members want to avoid unemployment, which causes dependency on state benefits, social exclusion, poverty, and de-motivation.

The Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans has identified key areas that policy makers could address to improve employment and economic growth for refugee and new immigrant populations:

- Support workforce development programs with culturally & linguistically competent staff.
- Improve quality and access to English language courses

¹ http://www.bls.gov/opub/gp/pdf/gp09_14.pdf

Support workforce development programs with cultural and linguistic resources

Members of the Asian community often seek employment help from workforce development programs provided by culturally and linguistically supportive organizations (such as the Lao Assistance Center in North Minneapolis or CAPI in South Minneapolis). These organizations provide job search training, followed by one-to-one employment support, which allow clients to be independent and able to compete in the labor market.

Staff from these organizations has reported that mainstream workforce development program have not served new American populations well due to the mainstream's:

- Lack of employment programs targeting Asian and new American populations
- Inability to address linguistic barriers
- Lack of cultural competency about challenges specific to the Asian community
- Assumption that new Americans come with the same set of skills and knowledge that native-born Americans have.

While the conventional solution has been to rely on the state's mainstream workforce development programs, these solutions are unable to address the specific needs of the Asian Minnesotan population.

Policy-makers should support linguistic and culturally specific solutions either among non-profits that serve the Asian and new American communities or reform mainstream programs to better serve these communities.

Improve quality and access to English language courses

Lack of linguistic proficiency is one of the primary causes of a disadvantaged position in the labor market and reduces community members' ability to participate and integrate with mainstream society.

Access to English language courses remains to be important for community members with limited English proficiency. Unfortunately, ESL courses often have long wait lists and an insufficient number of instructional hours to achieve a language level necessary to progress towards further training, education, or suitable employment.

Policy-makers should ensure that new refugees and immigrants have access to suitable language training as soon possible and that funding to ESL programs is increased to mitigate long waiting lists and short course lengths.

Spotlight on the unskilled labor pool

In the past, unskilled and uneducated Asian Minnesotans found employment in manufacturing or other unskilled job sectors. Unfortunately, dependence on these jobs masked the economic vulnerabilities of these workers until unskilled jobs largely disappeared as a result of outsourcing.

Many of these workers are older now, yet have little in the way of professional skills or formal education. Without retraining, they cannot compete for 21st century jobs that increasingly require better English skills, formal education, and technology and computers skills.

For more information about this policy brief, please contact the Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans, at capm@state.mn.us