Older Immigrants Face More Challenges During Pandemic

Language barriers, loneliness, difficulty accessing food and medicine, and unfamiliarity with new technology are major issues.

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The current health crisis has caused many problems for many people. But elderly immigrants are experiencing even bigger challenges due to linguistic and cultural barriers that have only been heightened by the coronavirus pandemic, reports the American Heart Association.

Before the pandemic, immigrant seniors already faced health care struggles as a result of a health care system ill equipped to address their needs, experts say. Now, these seniors are at even greater risk of severe COVID-19 illness caused by the virus.

For example, language barriers make it hard for health care providers to properly communicate basic information about the coronavirus to immigrants who don't speak English well or don't have someone to translate for them.

Another problem is that many older immigrants are lonely and are requesting assistance getting necessities such as food and medicine. In addition, they're unable to understand how to use common technological devices, such as smartphones, explains Karen Grimsich, an administrator in the Aging and Family Services Division of the Human Services Department in Fremont, California.

In one instance, Grimsich's department dispatched police to conduct a welfare check on an older woman who didn't know how to answer her new phone, which is a very serious problem during this time of mandated isolation.

Additionally, older immigrants may not trust the American health care system or even be able to access medical providers, putting them at a greater risk for complications from the virus.

Discrimination, which findings show has increasing during the COVID-19 crisis, may also trigger mental health issues and suicidal thoughts, especially for people of Asian descent.

Some older immigrants also live in overcrowded households where they may care for young children and may live with relatives who are essential workers, causing additional stress.

But such family units can also provide older immigrants with important practical and emotional support.

In Fremont, seniors trained as volunteers help other elderly immigrants as part of the city's Community Ambassador Program for Seniors. Grimsich believes older immigrants have already overcome many challenges, and their strength, wisdom and resilience will help them conquer some of the obstacles associated with COVID-19.

"They are the answer," she says. "We have so much to learn from them."

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