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Asian-American Women Dip Their Toes into U.S. Politics

Program teaches the basics of government, running for office



Ludi Hughes (second from left), Seema Singh (4th from left), Ingrid Reed (5th from left) (State Dept./Jane Morse)

By Jane Morse
Staff Writer

Washington -- Although people of Asian descent have been part of the American society for generations, Asian-American women only recently have taken any broad interest in participating in U.S. politics, according to experts on the topic.

"Asian-American women are just sort of 'sticking their toe into the waters,'" says Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and

Politics (CAWP) at Rutgers University of New Jersey.

According to CAWP, of the 86 women serving in the 110th U.S. Congress, only two are Asian Americans; only 30 of the 1,741 women state legislators serving nationwide are Asian-American women.

"I think a lot of Asian women are working very hard; they have professions, and that's really where their focus is," Walsh told *America.gov*. "There is not a lot of encouragement to get involved in politics, so we're trying to do that beginning work."

To help Asian-American women learn about the basics of U.S. governments and politics, CAWP launched in 2007 a one-day program called Rising Stars. Aimed primarily at women living in New Jersey, the program is an adjunct to Ready to Run: Campaign Training for Women, a nonpartisan program offered each of the last 10 years by CAWP, a unit of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers.

"One of the things we heard from some of the Asian women [participants]," Walsh said, "[is that] they were so excited because it was the first time they had seen women in politics that looked like them. And I think that's really important. If you don't see people at the table who look like you, it's hard imagining yourself there."

LEARNING THE BASICS, BUILDING BRIDGES

Inspired in part by the success of the five-year-old program for Hispanic women known as Elección Latina, Asian-American women lobbied for their own program -- but one that is much more elementary, according to Ingrid Reed, policy analyst and director of the New Jersey Project, an initiative designed to reinforce and expand the contributions to the state by Rutgers' Eagleton Institute of Politics.

Rising Stars workshops provide overviews of American and New Jersey politics as well as round-table discussions that feature women in the Asian community who have been involved in public leadership in various ways, such as elected or appointed officials, campaign workers or nonprofit group board members.

Taking the long-term view, Reed told *America.gov*: "If you look at the way immigrants get involved in government -- they first relate to their own group with language and issues that are community issues. And once they're comfortable there, it really takes the next generation to begin to think that they can and should play a role in the larger arena. This doesn't happen overnight, and so we're really glad that they have come together and started the process."

Numbering 14.9 million, Asian Americans, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, make up about 5 percent of the U.S. population. Chinese, Filipinos, Asian Indians, Vietnamese, Koreans and Japanese are part of this category.

"It's a really complex, this 'Asian American' [label], but in order for us to really be united we should know the issues of each one of our communities," says Ludi de Asis Hughes, founder of the Asian-American Chamber of Commerce and chair of the

Filipino Heritage Foundation in New Jersey.

"We can no longer be Filipino; we can no longer be Korean: we are going to have to be 'Asian Americans' -- that's the only way we can empower our Asian-American community," Hughes, herself a Filipina, told *America.gov*.

JUMPING INTO POLITICS

Seema M. Singh, president of the Asian Indian Chamber of Commerce, helped launch Rising Stars and has chaired the program for the two years of its existence. The experience, she said, motivated her to make a "guinea pig" of herself by running for the New Jersey Senate in the 14th Legislative District in 2007.



Seema Singh (State Dept./Jane Morse)

New Jersey Governor John Corzine appointed Singh to the post of ratepayer advocate, representing New Jersey consumers of services such as energy and water. But she never had run for an elected position.

In the 2007 race, Singh lost to the incumbent who had held the position for eight years. But victory was not her only goal, she said.

"I ran because I really want to make that dent and create that pathway for Asian Americans," she told *America.gov*.

Although many Asian Americans have lived in the United States for many years and are citizens, many -- especially the women -- never voted in an election, she said. "They've never registered to vote because they never really understood the process," Singh said.





"With my running, for the first time, these women were getting out to vote," said Singh, who is of Asian-Indian extraction. "The fact that I was running from the community -- it was an incentive for them; I really mobilized them."

For additional information, see "[World Needs More Women Holding Public Offices, Expert Says](#)" and "[Latina Women Expand Political Involvement in the United States.](#)"

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