IOG: Senior In-Service Training

Participants in the Institute of Gerontology's Senior Companion / Respite Aide program gather once a month at UDC's Van Ness campus for “In-Service.” This is the term for when the almost 100 senior volunteers meet for half a day, training, fellowship, fun and to take care of program-related housekeeping items. The In-Service trainings are mandatory per the terms of the grant that funds the SC / RA program.

"I believe that seniors should be able to age gracefully and with dignity," she passionately explained to the seniors attending the training at UDC's flagship campus. "I see seniors as a crown jewel of society; knowledge, wisdom and experience? Seniors have it," Ms. John said when introducing herself the following day to Asian and Pacific Islander volunteers, meeting them also for the first time.

It may come as a surprise to many, but the Institute of Gerontology’s volunteer program also has an Asian-American component. There are 11 Asian-American volunteers in the program, who attend a separate In-Service in D.C.'s Chinatown neighborhood. For this population, the volunteers are predominantly related to their clients--an important distinction because of the language barrier.

"These clients need people who understand them and speak their language," explains Mr. Kenneth So, director of the Asian and Pacific Islander Senior Center. "And the volunteers often don’t speak English either."

That’s where Mr. So comes in, serving as translator during the monthly sessions. When necessary, a client will address an issue with their Senior Companion, who then takes the problem to Mr. So, who in turn translates the concern to the Institute of Gerontology. Mr. So has help from Ms. Kay Gibb, a community outreach coordinator for the Metropolitan Police Department's Asian Liaison Unit. Ms. Gibb volunteers with the Asian and Pacific Islander Senior Center once per week.

"D.C.'s Chinatown is diminishing and this population is close to my heart. To the Chinese culture, the seniors are crown jewels, as Ms. John said. And they have lots of experience and narratives to share," explained Ms. Gibb.
"For our seniors, because of the language barrier, sometimes they are not well informed in certain matters, so it’s good to have the month In-service and guest speakers; such as today’s session on Alzheimer’s. There is a need for practical information on this and many more issues."

Mr. So was referring to guest speakers, who present on a featured topic. After the speaker, the seniors have the opportunity to have a dialogue about the monthly topic. For the API seniors, they very much wanted to know more on the topic on Alzheimer’s and had a lively discussion with Ms. John, who pulled double-duty as the special presenter.

In-Service also features a guest speaker, and for the month of August that was Ms. Claudia John, of the Institute of Gerontology, who presented on Alzheimer’s. According to Ms. John, in 2013, over five million Americans were diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease, a type of dementia and the most common among older people. The disease affects part of the brain that controls thought, memory and language, and the ability to carry out activities of daily living (ADL). Symptoms tend to appear after age 60 and risk factors increase with age. By 2050, 14 million Americans will be affected by the disease.

Next month, the senior volunteers will meet at the UDC farm.

The Institute of Gerontology is part of the Center for Nutrition, Diet and Health, a division of CAUSES.

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