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Nonprofits Search for Asian-American Foster Parents to Fill Culture, Language Needs

by MONICA LUHAR

LOS ANGELES — When he was a teenager, Wilson Sun bounced around about half a dozen foster homes in Los Angeles County, he told NBC News.

In many of the homes, he felt like he was an outcast and not treated as a member of the family, he said. A few times, he shoplifted from malls and grocery stores because his foster families didn't provide him with a large enough allowance, he added.



Wilson Sun, sharing his experience as a former foster youth at the Asian Foster Family Initiative March 2017 info session. Courtesy of APCTC

It wasn't until he was matched with Spencer Sun through Sun's involvement with the nonprofit Chinatown Service Center that Wilson Sun felt he had found a parent that truly cared for him. Wilson Sun ended up living with his former foster parent through college and, after receiving a full

scholarship to study accounting, changed his name to "Sun" when he got married.

“To be a parent or foster parent you have to have a lot of perseverance and patience because at the end of the day you’re going to see both the good and ugly of the foster kids too,” Sun, now 27, told NBC News. “[Spencer Sun] was the first parent that I felt was genuine that provided unconditional love and it was truly sincere. Spencer has done so much for me. He was the one who pushed me to want more in life.”

“Many of these Chinese kids are new immigrants, so it’s even more traumatic that they are placed in non-Chinese speaking homes, or non-Asian foster homes.”

Nonprofits in Los Angeles are looking for more Asian-American foster parents like Spencer Sun to serve the county's foster children with a particular focus on language ability and cultural understanding.

More than 18,000 children in LA County are in foster care, according to Neil Zanville, a spokesperson for the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services. Of those children, approximately 1.8 percent is Asian American and Pacific Islander, Zanville noted.

But despite that, the number of Asian-American foster families is limited, according to LA-based nonprofit Korean American Family Services (KFAM), which recruits and trains foster families among providing other services.

“In our mind, it might not be a large percentage, but 600 to 800 [Asian-American and Pacific Islander] foster kids is a good number of kids who could really benefit from having a family that understands their cultural needs,” KFAM executive director Connie Chung Joe told NBC News.

Three years ago, the organization struggled to find even one licensed foster care parent of Korean descent in Los Angeles and Orange Counties after meeting with community members who were concerned that kids were being put in households that struggled with language and cultural barriers.

“When we asked around, there were none in the Cambodian, Chinese, or other communities, either,” Chung Joe said.

Karen Lim, program director at Special Service for Groups’ Asian Pacific Counseling and Treatment Centers (APCTC), a nonprofit which partners with KFAM, noted that there are a significant number of Chinese kids who are removed from their homes due to alleged abuse and neglect, but very few Chinese-speaking families who can take them in.

“Many of these Chinese kids are new immigrants, so it’s even more traumatic that they are placed in non-Chinese speaking homes, or non-Asian foster homes,” Lim told NBC News.

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The lack of licensed Asian-American foster care parents and common misconceptions about the process to become one prompted KFAM to begin recruiting efforts.

In January 2014, the organization launched the Korean Foster Family Initiative. In December 2015, KFAM expanded its recruiting efforts into the Chinese community, partnering with APCTC and Chinatown Service Center, and rebranded the program as the Asian American Foster Family Initiative.

In December 2016, KFAM became a licensed foster family agency, allowing the organization to train and directly approve and certify foster families, Chung Joe said.

Since 2014, KFAM has been able to recruit 39 foster parents of Korean descent, according to Chung Joe, and the organization’s first group of foster families of Chinese descent is approaching approval.

The initiative’s current focus is finding potential Filipino foster parents, as they comprise the largest population of Asian-American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) foster kids in LA County, Chung Joe said.

“We’ve also been in discussion with Cambodian and South Asian [community-based organizations] who are asking if they can partner with us to expand into their communities,” she added.



Asian Foster Family Initiative team members, foster parents, former foster youth, community partners and supporters at the March 2017 info session. Courtesy of APCTC

On July 30, the Asian American Foster Family Initiative is scheduled to host an information session, "How to Become a Resource/Foster Parent," which is expected to include testimonies from Spencer and Wilson Sun.

"There's not that many Asian-Americans that will come out to speak, let alone have a story similar to mine's where despite everything, you pulled through and have a happy ending which is not common in foster care families," Wilson Sun said. "Despite losing parents, you will find someone that truly loves you."

Spencer Sun told NBC News that his faith played a role in deciding to become a foster care parent and in the AAPI community, conversations about safety and security are heavily emphasized, which may serve as an impediment to fostering.

Sun received initial pushback from his own parents and family when taking on the role as a foster care parent, he noted.

“I think they thought it was too risky and didn’t know what’s going to happen when you bring a strange kid into your home and you don’t know their background,” Sun said.

Sun added that, while foster parents being the same racial or ethnic group as foster children may help the transition go a bit easier, the ultimate goal is to find foster children a loving home after being removed from a traumatic environment.

“I just think that the kids can discern whether the foster parents genuinely care for them or not and so that would trump ethnicity and race,” Sun said.

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