

Asiatown group flexed its muscles in census drive

By Charlie Zong *STAFF WRITER*



Marie D. De Jesús / Staff photographer

Deborah Chen, director of civic engagement programs for OCA-Greater Houston, goes over informational material Aug. 13 that's intended to be delivered to members of the community.

Deborah Chen knew every person in her Asiatown neighborhood mattered. But for a few months last fall, whether they counted depended on how fast the community activist could stick labels on 100,000 flyers promoting the 2020 census.

As Korean pop songs played at Shabu House, Chen's restaurant-turned-census outreach hub, wait-staff and volunteers with a local nonprofit sat at tables correcting dates on flyers and calendars the small organization couldn't afford to print again. Board members took home boxes of flyers to help.

Days before, the Census Bureau abruptly moved up the survey's deadline from Oct. 31 to Sept. 30. The change in early August threatened to throw off the canvassing operation of nonprofit OCA-Greater Houston. The operation left materials on 221,000 doorsteps in Alief, Sharpstown, Asiatown and Gulfton.

The southwest Houston neighborhoods are home to many immigrants, refugees, young children and others the census has struggled to count accurately. A complete count is critical for policymakers and researchers, said Jie Wu, research operations director at Rice University's Kinder Institute. Its recent Houston housing report relied on census data to show where local officials should fund affordable housing, homeownership help and rent relief.

Recounts are expensive, and a widespread undercount is "very difficult" to compensate for, Wu said. Ethnic minority groups are especially vulnerable, she said, because of language barriers and confusion over former President Donald Trump's highly public but unsuccessful campaign to add a citizenship question, a move advocates feared would depress the response rate of Houston's large immigrant population.

The pandemic meant that only OCA-GH was willing to canvass the area, said Chen, director of civic engagement programs. With the new deadline, the stickers on flyers could keep thousands of families from responding too late — and their communities from losing the legislative seats and thousands of tax dollars per person allocated according to the census, she said.

Chen felt the pandemic slam into southwest Houston. A false rumor of COVID spread emptied Chinese restaurants like hers and drove residents behind closed doors weeks before the city locked down. The census was the last thing on the minds of southwest Houston residents who spoke limited English and were unfamiliar with the process, she said.

But as Chen worked her third census, she said she faced a bigger obstacle to getting her neighbors counted: the Census Bureau itself. Under Trump, the agency moved the deadline multiple times, extending it in April to Oct. 31 and later pulling back to Sept. 30 before the Supreme Court permitted the bureau to stop Oct. 15.

"We wasted money printing thousands of labels and sheets because we had to keep changing the dates," Chen said. Some were donated to local census workers because they initially lacked an adequate budget, she said.

"It's really sad when you have government employees having to go to nonprofit organizations or small businesses to try and raise money to print government-funded translated materials," said Chen, who believes Congress and Trump officials underfunded the bureau while throwing off independent outreach efforts.

"(The bureau's regional office) really did their best to work with us and for the community," Chen said. "They were being handicapped by the upper levels of their administration. There was a deliberate effort to undercount people and intimidate people with the citizenship lawsuit and changing the dates multiple times."

In a statement emailed Thursday, the bureau would not confirm whether workers had used handouts from community groups and said it provided enough materials to "impact" local communities.

Still, bureau data shows Houston's self-response rate dropped 10 percentage points when compared with 2010, potentially depriving schools, hospitals and other public services of hundreds of millions in federal funding. Almost 59 percent of city residents responded directly to the survey, below the state's 63 percent and the national average of 67 percent.

Chen said response rates in areas OCA-GH canvassed rose between 2 and 20 percent based on bureau data prior to the campaign. The nonprofit saved money over three years for the census and spent creatively, making its own materials and sourcing personal protective equipment from restaurant supply stores, Chen said.

“We just worked really hard,” she said. “We knew if we didn’t do it, no one else would.”

From August through October, Chen and Shabu House waitstaff sat among coronavirus barrier curtains, forming an assembly line for thousands of census calendar sheets, hand fans and other giveaways. A dozen flyers in English, Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, Urdu and Spanish told families about voter registration, the pandemic eviction moratorium and how to apply for rent relief.

Canvassing teams of college students, out-of-work restaurant staff and retirees stopped by to grab bags before dispersing to several of the 430 apartment complexes covered. Two to three shifts reached about 5,000 doors daily, said lead organizer Laura Floyd.

As October neared, Floyd said, she and Chen sometimes slept in hallways surrounded by bags that had to be redone after deadline changes.

“We would get updates to changes to the census literally as we were outside, in the sun, at apartment complexes dropping bags,” Floyd said. “At some point I thought, OK, well, at least everyone is going to know about their voting rights, whether or not they get counted.”

For Chen, who said the 2030 census is likely her last, OCAGH’s once-a-decade effort was justified by more accurate political representation, key to civic engagement. Census data forms the basis for redistricting, the decennial redrawing of state and federal electoral districts. An undercount would shrink the overwhelmingly minority neighborhoods’ political clout for years, Chen said.

“It’s the most effective form of voter suppression,” she said as she sat in OCA-GH’s Asiatown office, piled high with leftover census items and materials for upcoming elections. She typed away at a document to send to a national network of similar advocates: “2030 census best practices and to-do’s.”

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