

Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling

By Adrienne LaFrance 10/28/2011



Adrienne LaFrance/Civil Beat

WASHINGTON — Dozens of government and academic leaders gathered at the [Center for American Progress](#) on Friday to discuss ways to combat a "glaring invisibility" of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the federal policy arena.

"We need to do more in this realm," said President Barack Obama's cabinet secretary, [Christopher Lu](#), who serves as co-chair of the [White House Initiative](#) on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. "And I can make the commitment on behalf of the president that we will do that."

Lu said that while he is "proud to serve a president who has appointed more Asian Americans in more significant positions than any other president in history," research shows that Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders make up a tiny fraction of those who serve as top-level federal executives in the [Senior Executive Service](#).

Symposium participants agreed that diversity is critical in the Senior Executive Service, especially given the fact that its [main goal](#) is to make sure that the federal government is responsive to the "needs, policies and goals of the nation."

"(Our) mission is very simple," said Tommy Hwang, chair of the [Asian American Government Executives Network](#) (AAGEN). "It is to help more (Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders) get to the SES level. That's our entire mission."

Here's a look at the racial breakdown of employees who served in the executive branch between 2005 and 2010, according to AAGEN board member Carson Eoyang's 2011 essay, "Bamboo Ceilings in the Federal Service."

Group	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
All	7,107	7,217	7,473	7,736	7,712	7,905
White	6,019	6,094	6,310	6,530	6,386	6,477
Black	587	589	598	632	694	762
Hispanic	249	270	278	283	292	301
Asian or Pacific Islander	156	165	181	187	220	243
Native American	94	96	95	95	98	108

Until mid-December, AAGEN is accepting applications to a pilot program to help qualified Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders secure SES-level jobs.

"It's not going to happen by itself," Hwang said. "We need to take action."

Doua Thor, a commission member of the White House's Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, said that it's time to challenge "perceptions about what leadership looks like" in the United States.

"This is really a leadership question," Thor said. Are (Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders) able to access high-level positions and how do people really see leadership in this country?"

A more fundamental question that the symposium raised: How do people — and lawmakers in particular — see Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders?

"Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders are the only ethnic groups in California where cancer is the leading cause of death," said California Assemblyman Mike Eng. "A majority of Hmong, Laotian and Cambodian — a majority of them! — have not completed high school in our state. Samoan children have the largest body-mass index of any child of any ethnic group in California. Koreans have the highest rate of uninsurance of any ethnic group, not just Asians... If we don't know who we serve, we don't know how to serve."

Researchers continue to push for disaggregated information so that decision-makers have a more precise understanding of the challenges that face different groups within the larger Asian American and Pacific Islander communities.

Congresswoman [Judy Chu](#), D-Calif., says that the so-called model-minority myth perpetuated by presenting statistics about combined groups of Asian American and Pacific Islanders — rather than looking at them separately — remains persistent in Congress.

"Most people in Washington, D.C., only focus on that first group: The high-achieving students who are outpacing their peers and being raised by the 'tiger moms,'" Chu said. "It really doesn't make sense to lump together populations as diverse as ours. The Asian American Pacific Islander community is made up of 48 different ethnicities that speak over 300 different languages. We all took different paths to get here, we started at different places, and we are facing different sets of challenges."
