A Permanent Solution: Filipino Nurses and the U.S. Immigration Nursing Relief Act of 1989

Individual paper | Session: Immigration/Migration | SSHA 2023

Andre A. Rosario, BSN, RN-BC
PhD Candidate, University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing
arosario@nursing.upenn.edu

In the 1980s, amid a severe nursing shortage in the United States, the Immigration Nursing Relief Act of 1989 was ratified. The law made it easier for foreign-educated nurses to stay in the U.S. as legal permanent residents and to continue to work in hospitals that were otherwise short-staffed. Legislators recognized that the majority of foreign-educated nurses migrated from the Philippines, and during a Congressional session, one even called the bill the "Philippine Nurses Bill." However, Filipino American nurses' perspectives on the bill and their political action to support it have received scant attention from historians and health services researchers. Previous work on Filipino American nurses' political action has emphasized that different groups of Filipino American nurses have organized around different concerns—even different ideological bases. Historian Catherine Ceniza Choy has traced the radical rationales for Filipino American organizations that formed in the 1970s and sought to challenge U.S. imperialism in the Philippines and Asia, as well as racism in the U.S. health-care system.[1]

Meanwhile, in this presentation, I extend upon Choy's work to introduce more recent examples of Filipino American nurses' political action and identifying organizing tactics that sought more mainstream influence. Using Congressional records, organizational archives from the Philippine Nurses Association of America, and opinion pieces published in nursing journals, I compare the interests of Filipino American nurses to those of legislators, hospital administrators, and leaders in the nursing profession. To examine Filipino American nurses' perspectives as ethnic

minorities among a majority-White profession and to understand their organizing, I blend approaches from social and political history, following historiographical directions in the history of nursing and nurses' roles in policymaking.[2] I show how Filipino American nurses' political action (specifically, organizing in professional organizations and testifying in Congress) has been central—not peripheral—to policy related to foreign-educated nurses. Finally, I explore how the 1989 law marks a debut for a particular class of Filipino American nurses: an elite among this migrant group that wields political agency. By tracing the formation of a Filipino American nursing elite, this presentation complicates overgeneralizations of immigrants and nurses as powerless or passive to policy. Currently, as burnt-out nurses leave their jobs, more Filipino nurses are being recruited to work in U.S. hospitals. This presentation offers historical insight into how previous waves of Filipino nurses have established the networks and circumstances for ongoing nurse migration.

---

[1] Catherine Ceniza Choy, *Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 166–67.

[2] Cynthia Anne Connolly, "Beyond Social History: New Approaches to Understanding the State of and the State in Nursing History," *Nursing History Review* 12 (2004): 5–24.