

Center focuses on helping Tongans living in south L.A.

By Greg Hitchcock
Contributor

Immigrants from the Pacific island of Tonga are an often underserved community in the United States.

But one organization is offering programs to help improve their lives.

The Tongan Community Center in Hawthorne, which serves many Tongan families in Southern California, is part of a larger nonprofit organization, Special Service for Groups, which helps fund and develop community programs.

Vanessa May, interim program manager, said the center is focused on helping Tongans in south Los Angeles. The need is definitely there, she said.

There are 57,183 Tongans living in the United States, and 22,893 of them live in California, according to the 2010 U.S. Census.

A native Tongan, May is one of many who have benefited from working at the center, especially when



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE TONGAN COMMUNITY SERVICE CENTER

A man gets a flu shot at the Tongan Community Service Center. The clinic is a collaboration between the Tongan Community Service Center and the Samoan National Nurses Association in Carson.

it comes to the needs of the Tongan people.

"It's an honor to work here and serve my community. I feel like I've benefited," she said.

May describes the Tongan Community Center as a nonpartisan, interfaith-based community and human services organization that provides needed tools for people of Tongan descent.

Programs include assis-

tance with naturalization, language classes, youth programs and more.

A program that May said she is proud of is a voting project called Elevate your Voice. It's intended to get the larger Pacific Island voting population out to vote.

Another issue the center focuses on is health care, said May.

"Tongans have a high risk for obesity and non-

communicable diseases like diabetes and heart disease," she said. "We promote health initiatives like cancer awareness, research and training. We have created posters translated into Tongan of the eight ways to reduce the risk of cancer."

The center promotes early health screenings, mammograms and pap smears, among other preventive tests.