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Chinatown Gets $1 Million Grant

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The Chinatown economy, reeling since Sept. 11, got a shot in the arm yesterday when U.S. Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao came bearing one nice gift — a $1 million grant to help those who have lost their jobs since the terror attack.

"I want to be here to offer special assistance so we can train and retrain dislocated workers," Chao said. "We want to make sure they are reconnected with the work force."

Chao, who made the announcement at the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, on Mott Street, was greeted in Chinatown as if she were a returning queen.

And in many ways, she is.

The China native grew up in Jamaica and Syosset, graduating from Syosset High School. She says that soon after her appointment by President George W. Bush as the first Asian-American woman in a cabinet position, she vowed to visit Chinatown, a neighborhood that she pointed out raised $2 million for the city fund set up after Sept. 11.

"Others who had no money to give opened their hearts," she said. "They gave blood and displayed American flags. . . . These acts of compassion and courage are the very strengths of this community."

Words of praise, however, are far from the only thing Chinatown needs.

For weeks, phone lines servicing the area were down and deliveries were slowed by street closures and security checkpoints.

Merchants say business is still off as much as 50 percent and has only recently begun to slowly pick up. Normally crowded restaurants are often only partly filled. And more than half of the 12,000 Chinatown garment workers have lost their jobs, with their union saying most of the factories are operating at less than 50 percent capacity.

The $1 million National Emergency Grant follows a recent initiative, set up at the CCBA, by the U.S. and state departments of labor, to aid the unemployed in applying for insurance benefits.



Newsday Photo / Mayita Mendez

U.S. Labor Secretary Elaine Chao, far right, with Gov. George Pataki, center, during a visit to Chinatown yesterday.

"We can never forget the effect the Sept. 11 attack has had on Chinatown," Gov. George Pataki said. "We cannot leave out, not leave behind, this community."

Some merchants, however, aren't so optimistic. Sandy Yeung, owner of a small gift shop in Mott Street, says that she has been forced to cut in half the hours worked by her three employees.

Yesterday, a day she normally has off, Yeung sat in her empty shop with her son Jonathan, 12, whom she enlisted to help out — for free — because she can no longer afford to pay her regular employees to work on Saturday.

"Before, my workers worked 14 hours," Yeung said. "Now, they work maybe five, six hours. There's not a lot of tourists. All the stores are empty."

Nodding her head in agreement was Linde Ng, who normally would be standing behind the counter of her shop next door, the Ming Fay Book Store.

"I have no business," Ng said. "My rent is $5,000. I'm still paying, but my workers are all working less hours. I don't know when it's going to get better."

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