



Asian American Federation

New York State Joint Assembly and Senate Legislative Hearing *Solutions to the Disproportionate Impact of COVID-19 on Minority Communities*

May 18, 2020

Thank you, Chairs Jackson, Braunstein and all of our state legislature allies for inviting us to testify today.

My name is Jo-Ann Yoo, and I am the executive director of the Asian American Federation (AAF). AAF's mission is to raise the influence and well-being of the pan-Asian American community through research, policy advocacy, public awareness, and organizational development. We represent a network of nearly 70 member and partner agencies that support our community through their work in health & human services, education, economic development, civic participation, and social justice.

As we plan to re-open our state and city, we are facing the glaring disparities of the American class and caste system. As the terrible number of deaths reveal, Black and Latino communities have paid a disproportionate price in terms of death, illness, and jobs lost. These numbers have been exacerbated by the lack of available testing in communities of color despite being the hardest hit. These outcomes were inevitable if we take into account the years of socioeconomic neglect and lack of funding directed at these communities. In the Asian community, small business owners have been devastated by the double impact of the ravages of COVID-19 and the economic boycott that started in January as customers began to associate the virus wrongly with Asian store owners. Even as we move forward, we are waiting for the real picture and the real numbers and impact on communities of color to emerge.

Many of you, along with the nonprofit organizations, have worked together to stand in solidarity for policies that ensure our communities of color receive access to bigger pies instead of forcing our communities to all fight over the same small piece. Now, as we walk together into this new post-COVID-19 world, there is an opportunity for our State and City to re-imagine policies and implement systems that are built on the foundations of true racial and economic justice. We should work toward systems and policies that center the marginalized, the poor, and the immigrant workers who have sustained our state and who the state discovered were "essential" during the worst crisis in recent history.

While the COVID-19 epidemic has negatively impacted the health and wellbeing of all New Yorkers, the Asian communities of our state are particularly vulnerable. **Asians are the fastest-growing major racial and ethnic group in New York City**, having increased by 61% from 2000 to 2017. The 1.4 million Asians living in the City represent 16% of the overall population. The

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number of Asian children in New York City also grew rapidly by 32% from 2000 to 2017, with just over 261,000 Asian children in the City.

I want to thank you for this opportunity to share with you what our staff and member agencies are experiencing on the front lines of COVID-19.

Budget and Funding Cuts:

For the past six years, we have worked in partnership with Black- and Latino-serving leadership organizations for state and city's budget equity for our nonprofit organizations. Even before the pandemic reached our shores, our communities were chronically starved of resources, with many of our member agencies scrambling to make payroll every month. Now, as we face harsh budget cuts, it is our nonprofits and communities who will bear the brunt of those shortfalls. Our member agencies, who provide essential, quality programs, now face the difficult decision of having to furlough or lay off their staff, adding to our state/city's growing unemployment numbers. Once again, our communities are paying the highest price in this crisis. Once again, the very same programs that work so well to move our families out of poverty and up the economic ladder are being starved of funds.

The Asian American community, despite comprising almost 16 percent of the city's population and being the fastest-growing population in New York City, receive, on average, a mere 1.4 percent of the City's social service contract dollars. Most of our member agencies are small community-based organizations (CBOs) that lack the capacity to compete with larger nonprofits for city contracts, so they are constantly relegated to subcontractor roles for funds that barely cover expenses for essential services like food programs, despite being the ones with the cultural competence and deep reach into their communities. Our member agencies are terrified that the one financial resource -the city discretionary funding, which has been a lifeline for Asian nonprofits to meet the critical needs of the poorest community in New York City, especially during a crisis like COVID-19, will be cut. The survival of many Asian nonprofits, who will be critical partners during the rebuilding process, depends on it.

Ex. During the crisis, our member agencies are using discretionary funds to purchase food for the seniors in their neighborhood, and they are terrified that those precious funds will be diverted and they will be left without resources to care for their clients. During a time when the most vulnerable members of our community are seeking assistance at unprecedented rates, our member agencies, who are best positioned to assist them, are having to radically change their operating models despite facing looming threats to their funding.

Asian CBOs are on the frontlines to ensure that our communities receive access to culturally competent meals, mental health services, in-language information about emergency resources to meet their myriad needs during this crisis, among other essential services. These organizations are a lifeline to the communities they serve and have trusted relationships with their clients, ensuring that the hardest-to-reach New Yorkers receive the help they need. We must ensure contract equity for nonprofits serving communities of color and make sure their voices are included and expertise honored in the deployment of rapid response funding.

On behalf of AAF and all nonprofits serving communities of color, we ask that you recognize us for our cultural competence during funding and emergency relief decisions, and that you direct contracts from the City to trusted community organizations like us to deploy rapid response services to the city's poorest population. The historic under-investment in Asian nonprofits has already led to their operating at a deficit, stretched beyond capacity to meet the burgeoning needs of the community. They cannot feasibly serve the explosion of COVID-19-related needs without dedicated funding.

Hate Crimes:

The coronavirus pandemic has unleashed anti-Asian bias in New York City, ranging in intensity, from shunning on subways, to being spat upon, to physical attacks. To date, the NYC Commission on Human Rights has gathered 105 reports of bias incidents directed at Asians in the city. These numbers are undoubtedly underreported: almost 70 percent of Asians in the city are immigrants, many live in poverty, have high rates of LEP, and lack immigration status – all factors that deter them from reporting hate crimes to law enforcement.

Since January, AAF has been leading advocacy with law enforcement and city officials to address the rising anti-Asian discrimination and rhetoric in the tristate area, as well as the drastic decline in customers supporting Asian-owned businesses and increased fear and anxiety among our community members. When media coverage of incidents like a woman being verbally attacked and physically intimidated in Rego Park is disseminated in our communities, many begin to fear for their safety and additional strain is placed on Asian-serving CBOs to address these incidents on top of other urgent COVID-19-related needs.

We are pushing for clearer reporting measures and education campaigns and trainings to denounce the racial bias incidents and hate crimes happening across the city and region. We have set up a hate reporting site that allows victims to report bias incidents and hate crimes in seven Asian languages, and we plan to use the information we collect to shape our advocacy and connect affected individuals to the resources they need. As a trusted leadership organization in the community, funding support for this effort will help us increase safety for the most vulnerable members of our community through coordinating response measures, such as encouraging reporting and developing community safety and security resources outside of law enforcement, and spearheading awareness campaigns in solidarity with Black and Latino communities. Our hate crimes strategy will be critical once the mandates are lifted and anti-Asian incidents may increase in the landscape of high unemployment rates and other COVID-19 consequences.

Unemployment and Public Benefits:

According to the Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity, 25 percent of the Asian community lives in poverty, and the poorest New Yorkers come from our community. From 2000 to 2016, poverty in the Asian community exploded by 44 percent. Our community already suffers deeply from a lack of immigration status, limited English proficiency (LEP), and limited access to economic opportunities. Now, the economic chasms will be even deeper and wider as the community emerges into a landscape of destroyed small businesses and lost employment.

Our research on Asian poverty in New York City has shown that low-income Asian workers are over-reliant on service industry jobs, such as nail and beauty salons and retail that were deemed non-essential. Others who were reliant on food service industry jobs have seen their hours cut and some Asian-owned restaurants have chosen to close because of the lack of workers and bias against patronizing Asian-owned restaurants, xenophobic treatment that began in early January against the backdrop of the disease spreading in Asia. One executive director shared that a client waived aside safety precautions due to necessity: *“I don’t care about COVID. If I stay home, my family doesn’t eat, and we risk eviction. I HAVE to risk my health for my family.”*

Despite the high poverty rate, Asian New Yorkers often do not seek out public benefits. Only 33% of Asians who meet the income guidelines receive food stamps, compared to 57% of non-Asians living at or below 130% of the federal poverty level. However, because of Trump’s cruel and oppressive public charge rule, many mixed-status immigrant families are going without food, shelter, and medical insurance amid fears that accepting public benefits will impact their immigration benefits. An analysis by HRA of SNAP enrollment rates showed that Asian non-citizens were almost 9 times more likely than Asian citizens to dis-enroll between January 2018 and January 2019, when in the past, both groups had similar enrollment rates, more in line with economic conditions. Our own analysis of American Community Survey data shows that use of **SNAP benefits by Asian non-citizens declined at twice the rate of non-Asian non-citizens from 2017 to 2018.**

In fact, in a survey with our member agencies, the universal response was that, despite assurances that use of public benefits would be permissible during the crisis, many families have chosen to seek other resources rather than face potential deportation scrutiny.

A combination of lack of awareness and ineligibility due to factors such as immigration status, and cultural reluctance to accept government assistance, contribute to the lack of utilization of benefits in the Asian community. The Public Charge rule is a contributing factor involved in dissuading Asian Americans from claiming the public benefits to which they are entitled. Immigrant New Yorkers are being intimidated into believing they must choose between their citizenship and their survival.

Language Access and Food Accessibility for Seniors:

There is an urgent need for senior-serving food programs, and Asian seniors, 25 percent of whom live in poverty and 83 percent of whom have LEP, are most at risk. There exists various inconsistencies with the City’s food delivery plan, such as a random deployment of meals to some clients in the City’s system and not to others, which has resulted in many Asian seniors not receiving access to regular meals. Using 311 can be difficult and confusing; it is a huge hurdle for LEP seniors to find information on how to register for centralized meals.

The creation of a dedicated language line would help to increase language access for food services. Asian CBOs like our member agencies are best-equipped to provide accessible and culturally competent services and are often the first stop for LEP immigrants seeking services. These organizations can help vulnerable seniors navigate the available food programs as well as other human services they need during this crisis.

Ex. One member agency staff tearfully shared that she has been scrambling to enroll her seniors in the food delivery program but that culturally appropriate meals were not an option. In order to ensure that her seniors didn't go hungry, she worked with a local restaurant to get them access to food they could eat. However, since her organization was not authorized to contract with the city, she had to spend a significant amount of time to help the restaurant fill out the paperwork to get into the contracting system, despite not understanding the city contracting process herself. She was frustrated that she had to spend so much precious time on administrative paperwork just so the elders in her community could eat.

Food contracts have left out umbrella organizations that serve communities of color, who have the expertise to coordinate with our member nonprofits to be innovative in sourcing culturally appropriate meals. At this time, many senior centers are not able to meet the volume of need and would be able to maximize the opportunity to coordinate with local restaurants to deliver meals and stock food pantries with meals that are familiar to their clients. This is particularly true of Muslim seniors, where the need for culturally appropriate halal meals is high.

Small Business Assistance:

Small businesses remain the backbone of our economy, providing a steady foundation through turbulent economic times. The importance of small businesses can be seen in the Great Recession of 2009, where Asian Americans and immigrants created 31 percent of net new businesses in New York City and created 52 percent of net new jobs¹. Immigrants often start small businesses because they are shut out of mainstream jobs due to language and cultural barriers, yet these small mom-and-pop stores pay taxes, provide jobs to local residents, and build economic foundations for the next generation.

Asian American small business owners faced consequences weeks prior to the first known infections in New York. Struggling with rising rents, gentrification, and reduced revenues from competition with big box stores and online retailers, small businesses were facing serious economic challenges even before COVID-19 hit our state. Starting in early January, Asian small businesses faced racist backlash from the virus, which resulted in an economic boycott of thousands of Asian American and immigrant-owned businesses. Erroneous beliefs, like eating Chinese food could transmit COVID-19, led to shops reporting revenue losses of up to 50 percent. Now, small businesses are facing the daunting reality of re-opening businesses that have seen a devastating drop in income since January and brought in zero income during quarantine.

Though relief measures like the emergency disaster loans and unemployment benefits offered through government agencies are welcome news, the reality is that most vulnerable small businesses are shut out of these programs for myriad reasons. First, most are not in a position to take on additional debt to keep open businesses that already had low profit margins, even with the prospect of loan forgiveness. Second, many Asian small businesses were unable to apply in the first place because in-language assistance and coherent instructions never materialized.

¹ NYC's Economic Engine: Contributions & Challenges of Asian Small Businesses, AAF, 2016

Our small businesses urgently need targeted assistance that meaningfully address the specific hardships that Asian American, immigrant, and all small businesses owners face to ensure their survival as well as the jobs they will protect.

Worker Safety, Testing, and Accommodations:

AAF received inquiries from our member agencies about how workers could access testing and sign up for hotel rooms where infected workers could isolate and recover. Limited testing has been made available to communities of color, there has been no way for workers to know if they are infected, which is critical because many low-wage workers live in overcrowded housing. If they suspect that they are infected with the virus, they do not know how to access the hotel rooms that the City has coordinated to quarantine themselves from their families or roommates.

Government must do a better job of disseminating in-language information about critical resources like these, especially for front-line workers who are potentially exposed every day they are out working.

Protecting Our Undocumented Community:

Even though undocumented immigrants, who are some of the most vulnerable New Yorkers, pay into the economy, COVID-19 relief programs have completely excluded them. This has meant that undocumented New Yorkers have had to continue to work in order to feed and shelter themselves and their families in the midst of the worst health crisis in recent history.

For the past two and a half years, AAF led the charge to legalize electric bicycles that are used by food delivery workers, who are mostly Chinese and Latino immigrants, with many lacking legal immigration status. Just before our state was hit by the pandemic, electric bicycles were legalized by Governor Cuomo, and AAF was headed back to the City Council to wrap up the legalization process. Then, as the virus began to rage throughout the boroughs, these delivery workers were designated as essential workers, effectively shelving the argument that their mode of work was non-essential and subject to over-policing. It should not have taken a global pandemic to make our government to realize that we rely on these immigrant workers to deliver food.

It was recently reported in *The City NY* that South Asian leaders have anecdotal knowledge of high numbers of dead in their community, especially in the Jackson Heights, Elmhurst, and Corona areas – the epicenter of the epicenter. The South Asian community has some of the poorest and most vulnerable workers in New York City. Many are cab drivers, cleaning staff, and home health aides, which means that they were classified as “essential” workers, but their deaths have not been acknowledged in the city’s accounting. This not only leads to a significant under-count of COVID-19-related deaths, but it also does not illustrate the level of service needs that Asian CBOs are trying to address with such little funding.

Mental Health:

Since the first weeks of the imposed quarantine, AAF has been organizing mental health workshops and coordinating support services for the Asian nonprofit community and the Asian community as a whole. Our leaders and staff on the front lines are suffering from stress, fear, anxiety, and depression. Our member agencies that operate mental health clinics are also seeing an uptick in request for mental health assistance, but our community lacks the capacity to meet the increasing

needs. Member staff are conducting hundreds of assurance calls to their seniors on a daily basis on top of their existing services and rapid response work.

In a community where the depression and suicide rates are high, exacerbated by deep stigma, there is real concern about our seniors who are socially isolated and unable to go outside; our children whose parents are reporting are behaving in disturbing ways due to the fear and anxiety arising from the pandemic; and our community members who are grappling with the uptick in anti-Asian hate crimes and the impact on their mental health. In this moment and for the future, we must increase the capacity to serve the growing mental health needs of our community and build their resilience to weather these challenges.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Budget and Funding Cuts:

- This is the opportunity to ensure that communities of color receive their fair share of programs. Nonprofits that serve Black, Latino and Asian communities are the front lines and must be ensured of adequate resources to support the most vulnerable members of our state and city.
- We must have contract reform that marginalizes communities of color and relegates them to subcontractor status.

Hate Crimes:

- We must educate vulnerable communities on their legal rights to file reports, and must hold law enforcement accountable to be more proactive to support the Asian community. They must not passively wait for reports, but must push for more outreach and community education and awareness.
- This is also a moment to build communities of color solidarity by investing in programs that educate about our individual and shared histories, and how we can work together to support each other during challenging times.

Unemployment and Public Benefits:

- Amend the government contracting process in order to acknowledge that Asian-led agencies are in the best position to provide culturally competent services directly to Asian New Yorkers.
- Fund the City's HRA and ACS to fully implement the language access requirements of the new Local Law 30, and well as increase their budgets for community organizations to account for new minimum wage laws.
- Encourage the enforce Local Law 30 across City agencies by eliciting feedback directly from community-based organizations regarding gaps in language services and/or providing funding to CBOs to provide in-language assistance.
- Support efforts of community-based organizations, including Asian-led agencies, to conduct outreach to immigrant communities on ongoing issues such as public charge.
- Increase investment in state- and city-funded safety net programs such as community health centers and clinics, and food pantries, with funds going directly to impacted communities instead of a subcontractor relationship.

- Partner with, and invest in, Asian CBOs to provide in-language communications and campaigns to inform immigrant families about developments in immigration policy.

Language Access and Food Accessibility for Seniors:

- Asian seniors are more likely to utilize services that reflect their traditional values and ethnic identities. Thus, community-based organizations with roots in their neighborhoods are best placed to get Asian seniors the help they need. Asian seniors, particularly more recently arrived ones, are less likely to know what services and programs are available to help them acclimate to life in New York and to address life events as they occur.
- Culturally competent programs will also understand the cultural and generational barriers that stop seniors from seeking help, particularly mental health services. This is critical since 40% of Asian seniors report experiencing depression, and Asian women ages 65 and older have the highest suicide rate across all racial and ethnic groups.

Small Business Assistance:

- Create Small Business Fund for Immigrant Community
 - Create a fund for Asian American and immigrant-owned small businesses that were excluded from the stimulus package previously.
 - Implement eligibility and required document list that recognizes the need for relief for the immigrant small business community, regardless of their immigration status
- Rent Relief
 - Extend current eviction moratorium (NYC) for commercial spaces
 - Extend current mortgage relief measure to allow deferred payment for commercial building rents
 - Incentivize landlords to give rent relief by expanding deferred payment of mortgages for commercial building owners
- Language access
 - Fund the creation of quality translated small business materials by community-based organizations
 - Provide adequate in-language materials and legal service to facilitate these small business owners to access resources to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic
 - Expand scope of outreach for disseminating information about COVID-19 relief efforts to utilize CBO network and their pre-existing communication lines with small businesses.

Workers Safety, Testing and Accommodations:

- Expand funding to communities of color, and ensure that all available programs are accessible to low-income communities, particularly those who are designated as “essential workers.”

Protecting our Undocumented Workers:

- Implement cash programs to support undocumented workers, and all safety net programs are offered to undocumented essential workers.

Mental Health:

- All New Yorkers are experiencing significant mental health issues from the trauma, from children with anxiety from being locked at home for months, workers who fear going to work

for fear of being infected, families who are struggling because they are dealing with loss of employment, and seniors who are feeling isolation. We will need significant resources for counseling and therapy so that we can re-focus and feel a semblance of security once again.

On behalf of AAF, I am grateful to this legislative body for the opportunity to share the contributions of our community and hope that our re-start will include visionary plans of a new economy that is centered on the working class – the very people who have kept our state going while most New Yorkers had the privilege of being at home during the pandemic. I realize that our state and city budgets are limited, but how we choose to spend those resources will speak volumes of what we value as a state.

After months of being at home, we will surely try to go back to what we know as normal, but this is an opportunity to reject all the injustices that we felt we could not fix, and bring together those who have been the most invisible so we can build a new state. I hope this legislative body will work with us to demand accountability and economic fairness for all.