



Asian Americans for Equality

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Written Testimony: Committee on Immigration

Immigrant Exclusion in COVID-19 Response (Hearing Date: September 18, 2020)

Testimony Submitted Online: September 21, 2020

Dear Speaker Johnson, Chairman Menchaca and Members of the Committee on Immigration:

Thank you for providing the opportunity for public input on the issue of immigrant exclusion during the COVID-19 crisis. We know that inequities at all levels of government did not begin with the pandemic; our communities have been advocating for resources and access to critical public support for many years. We are hopeful, however, that COVID-19 will be a catalyst to create a more equitable city and to implement meaningful change.

Asian Americans for Equality (AAFE) is a 46-year-old nonprofit organization which advances racial, social and economic justice for Asian Americans and other systematically disadvantaged communities. AAFE develops and manages affordable housing across New York City, empowers immigrant entrepreneurs and provides an array of community services for 20,000 New Yorkers each year.

During the past six months, the immigrant communities AAFE serves in Manhattan, Queens and Brooklyn have been devastated by the health and economic impacts of the pandemic. Long before statewide shutdown orders were issued, small business owners in Asian American enclaves were feeling the effects of COVID-19. Restaurants and shops across Chinatown and in Flushing and Sunset Park were on the verge of collapse as foot traffic in these neighborhoods dwindled. Physical and verbal racist and xenophobic attacks added to an atmosphere of fear. As the crisis deepened and New York shuttered, many community members lost income and were pushed to the brink of homelessness.

During this time, AAFE stepped in as a community “first responder,” a role our organization has played repeatedly over the years. We created an emergency fund to help small businesses get by until government help arrived. We helped people apply for unemployment benefits. We connected members of our community with medical assistance and food.

This pandemic has challenged our city and state governments in ways we could not have possibly imagined just a few months ago. Some efforts, such as the COVID-19 Immigrant Emergency Relief Program made possible through the Mayor's Fund, have made a real difference. Unfortunately, however, many government programs have failed to deliver for our immigrant communities, leaving them more vulnerable than ever before. As a community service provider, working on the front lines to address local needs in some of the city's hardest hit neighborhoods, we have seen the shortcomings first hand. We would like to share some of the challenges that we have faced during this difficult time.

In the spring, the Department of Small Business Services (SBS) launched loan and grant programs to help small businesses throughout the city. These underfunded programs were quickly overwhelmed and largely inaccessible to immigrant entrepreneurs, especially those with limited English-language capacity. Later, the federal government's Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) came online, offering more robust funding, but once again, immigrant-run small businesses lacking relationships with big banks were largely shut out of the early versions of PPP.

AAFE's affiliate, Renaissance Economic Development Corporation, has a long history of working with government agencies to disperse emergency small business funding in immigrant communities. While Renaissance and other CDFIs serving diverse communities were consulted when SBS was designing its COVID-19 programs, it was surprising that none of these grassroots groups was selected to administer the programs. As a result, there was no meaningful multilingual outreach in immigrant neighborhoods.

AAFE and Renaissance administered our own funds, utilizing grants from private funders and redirecting donations from our annual Lunar New Year Banquet (cancelled due to the pandemic). We made applications available in English, Chinese, Korean and Spanish. To date, we have closed more than 140 loans totaling over \$1.6 million through REDC's Emergency Loan Fund and have facilitated and closed about 80 loans for \$1.5 million through the Small Business Administration's PPP Program.

We encourage the Department of Small Business Services to continue delivering capital to the city's imperiled small businesses, but we urge the city to prioritize multi-lingual outreach to immigrant small businesses that are the backbone of our most vibrant neighborhoods. At the same time, we believe government at every level must do a better job of assessing the unique needs of New York's Asian American community. During the pandemic, city and state programs were rightly tailored for Black and Latinx entrepreneurs ([example: the Mayor's July 28 executive order](#)), while overlooking Asian-run businesses. This occurred in spite of the fact that New York's Asian enclaves felt the effects of the pandemic long before the city as a whole and the unemployment rate among Asian residents spiked 10,210% at the height of the pandemic (compared with the same period in 2019), higher than any other racial group.

Beyond small business aid, we have other concerns about inclusive community outreach. Soon after the federal CARES Act was enacted, our staff began hearing from community members unable to complete applications for unemployment insurance. The New York State Department of Labor was overwhelmed with applications, and its website repeatedly crashed. While applications were eventually made available in multiple languages, it was virtually impossible for many members of our community to navigate the English-only online system. Beginning in April, our staff began offering telephone assistance in Chinese and Spanish to help overcome some of the challenges people were facing. Similar problems were experienced with New York State's COVID-19 Rental Assistance Program. It was launched over the summer with no advance notice to local housing nonprofits normally involved in assisting with community outreach. The online application was inaccessible to Chinese speakers and a large swath of our community lacking a home computer. AAFE temporarily reopened its Chinatown office to help low-income tenants complete the application in person; however, they were largely shut out of the program, one of the few lifelines for low-income New Yorkers at risk of displacement.

Finally, we would like to highlight our concerns about the city's readiness to address the needs of the Asian homeless population. In the months ahead, there is no doubt that the homelessness crisis in New York City will worsen. AAFE has been in discussion with the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) about creating a Families with Children facility, the first of its kind in New York with the capacity to serve community members in Asian languages, including Chinese and Korean. DHS has stated that it doesn't see the need for this type of facility.

We believe this is another case in which current data collection and community assessment tools employed by city agencies fail to reflect the realities faced by Asian immigrants. Simply because homeless individuals and families of Asian descent are not in the DHS system, does not mean they don't exist. Oftentimes, they are reluctant to go to existing city shelters and instead end up in illegal boarding houses (such as Flushing's Nanoom House) or living in basement and boiler rooms. The data DHS is relying on is dated and does not reflect 2020 conditions. The agency does not survey in Asian languages, or track locations where Asians at risk of homelessness are likely to be found. The truth is that Asian homelessness is rising. Food banks in Asian American enclaves have been overwhelmed. Many members of our community are facing eviction. It is imperative that we act now to create linguistically and culturally appropriate facilities to meet their needs.

Our city will be coping with the impacts of the pandemic for years to come. But there are already important lessons we can learn from New York's initial response to COVID-19. It is critically important that future relief programs are accessible to all New Yorkers, especially immigrant communities that bear the brunt of large-scale disasters and economic downturns. This means a real commitment to multilingual outreach and engagement with community-based organizations who know our immigrant communities best. We at AAFE are grateful to the City Council for championing the work of grassroots nonprofit organizations in an incredibly

challenging budgetary environment. We look forward to working collaboratively with you in the months ahead to ensure that our immigrant communities receive the resources they so desperately need to emerge from COVID-19 stronger and safer.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jennifer Sun". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Jennifer Sun
Co-Executive Director
Asian Americans for Equality

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Thomas Yu". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Thomas Yu
Co-Executive Director
Asian Americans for Equality