



Creating Communities of Belonging and Supporting Entrepreneurship for API Immigrants and Refugees

Because of the multi-cultural histories and identities within the Asian American communities, the Asian Pacific American Municipal Officials (APAMO) Constituency Group chose to focus on how best to support local elected leaders to understand each other – the shared issues, concerns and history – and connect with each other using an educational lens for improved collaboration and personal growth.

Acknowledgements: Thank you for our authors Councilmember Janice Zahn, Position 5, Bellevue, WA and Angelo Ford, Constituency Groups Member Engagement Manager, NLC. We also appreciate the contributions of the Austin Asian Chamber of Commerce, and Vice Mayor Shawn Kumagai, City of Dublin, CA

The US Asian population is very diverse, comprising of more than 40 races and ethnicities. According to the 2020 census, the API community is the fastest growing racial group in the United States, growing by 35% over the past 10 years. Census data showed almost 20 million people identified as Asian and another four million identified as Asian combined with another racial group, making up 7.2% of the US population. Another 0.5% of the Asian population identified as Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander or in combination with another racial group.

As APAMO members reflected on 2020 and the realities of the API community, the following areas were identified as the most important to address in 2021:

- ◆ Creating welcoming communities of belonging for API immigrants and refugees.
- ◆ Spotlighting and working to reduce anti-Asian hate, bias and violent incidents stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ◆ Promoting API entrepreneurship and small business success, as Asian businesses became common targets for anti-Asian sentiments.



Who is APAMO?

As one of the National League of Cities' five constituency groups, APAMO brings together Asian Pacific American municipal leaders to network, share best practices and improve their ability to serve their Asian American and Pacific Islander (API) communities.

Established in 1985, APAMO is a caucus within NLC that provides municipal officials who identify and ally with the Asian Pacific American community a space to connect with their colleagues in a forum where they can share ideas and develop leadership experience.

APAMO serves as a vehicle for members to discuss shared interests, problems and explore solutions, debate policy issues and contribute to the collective success of American cities, towns and villages. Members meet several times a year and host a variety of webinars and virtual programs on topics of interest to elected officials and municipal staff.

APAMO recognizes that the Asian American and Pacific Islander community spans more than 40 races, ethnicities and cultures. It includes refugees and immigrants that have come to the United States with different lived experiences and histories, some who have been in the United States for multiple generations as well as new arrivals.

In 2021, APAMO partnered with external groups and leadership within NLC to explore policies, programs and practices that would create welcoming communities of belonging, combating anti-Asian hate and bias and supporting small businesses and entrepreneurs.

“The API community has been addressing the dual pandemic of COVID-19 and racism since the start of 2020. The increase in anti-Asian hate incidents, especially against Asian elders and women, in addition to scapegoating individuals of Asian ethnicity as causing the virus are unacceptable. These multiple attacks and demonstration of widespread hate affects Asians individually as well as against the many Asian owned small businesses. Children being called names in schools and being accused of “bringing the virus” is completely unacceptable and must be addressed.”

JANICE ZAHN, COUNCILMEMBER, POSITION 5, BELLEVUE, WA, PRESIDENT, APAMO

Over the last year, APAMO has used its platform to shine a light on the challenges with the current immigration policies and the best practices to develop communities that are immigrant and refugee friendly.

Communities of Belonging & Immigrant Friendly Cities

According to the National Community Reinvestment Coalition, immigrants play a central role in the U.S. economy, especially as essential workers in several of the industries hardest hit by the pandemic's economic impact. Approximately six million immigrants work in frontline occupations in healthcare, grocery stores, agriculture and transportation. Working in these essential jobs increases their risk of exposure to the virus, especially for those with healthcare occupations.¹ Immigrants also make up 20% of workers in the food service and domestic household service industries. These industries have faced significant economic impact due to the pandemic. Noncitizens are also more likely to be low-income and work low-wage jobs that do not offer paid sick leave or employer-sponsored health insurance.

In addition to these challenges for the employed, immigrants faced higher unemployment rates during the pandemic compared to non-immigrants. Between February and April 2020, unemployment rates for foreign born workers increased by 34%, more than the increase in unemployment rates experienced by native born workers.² Combined, these circumstances explain the disproportionately high rates of COVID-19 and economic hardship for the nation's immigrant population.

“While immigrants give so much of themselves, they face barriers to being welcomed and feeling like they belong. This is even more challenging for the many refugee communities, where a higher percentage have challenges with language proficiency that make it even more difficult to communicate digitally and not in person.”

SHAWN KUMAGI, VICE MAYOR, CITY OF DUBLIN, CALIF.

How Can Local Leaders Get Involved?

Here are a few steps that local leaders can take to create a community of belonging, combat anti-Asian hate and support small businesses in their community. A first step is understanding who is in our community. Use tools like the “2020 Census and Beyond: Mapping the Geography and Diversity of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders” at www.censusmaps.aapidata.com.

MAKE PROCLAMATIONS AS A LOCAL GOVERNING BODY

For most immigrants and refugees, the sense of belonging is essential to feeling connected to the communities where they live. Declare your city, town or village a Welcoming and Immigrant Friendly City; denounce Anti-Asian hate and violence and state explicitly that the municipality embraces an inclusive economy where diverse businesses are celebrated and can thrive.

SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS THAT PROVIDE DIRECT SERVICES TO IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

APAMO hosted a program featuring Debbie Lacy of Eastside for All, who spoke about the Welcoming Cities Collaborative in East King County, Washington. This partnership allows the neighboring First Tier Suburbs to work together to provide programs, resources and tools to help their cities and community members come together to improve the refugee and immigrant experience and raise voices not traditionally heard. Annually in September, as part of Welcoming America there is an opportunity to host Welcoming Week to celebrate and showcase the diverse cultures in cities, towns and villages. Activities can include community conversations and creating brave spaces for sharing personal origin stories and learning. The 2021 theme is “Belonging Begins With Us.”

OUTREACH

Using your voice as a local elected leader will have impact. Share with friends and family, members of your civic and religious groups about the immigrants and refugees in your community. This includes local business chambers who can help shape the employment policy as well as provide access to jobs and opportunities to immigrants to be strong contributors to the community and help achieve their dreams. Also, consider hosting community conversations to share and hear each other’s personal stories, cultural history and discover shared interests.

AMPLIFY YOUR VOICE ON THE STATE AND FEDERAL LEVEL

Call your Members of Congress and write letters to your local newspaper editors to advocate for immigrant and refugee concerns. Consider an op-ed or article to highlight your immigrant community voices. Changing national policy is the single most important way to help immigrants and refugees be successful.

PROVIDE SUPPORT AND RESOURCES

Elected officials can be powerful allies for immigrant and refugee businesses in their communities. From small business relief grants to helping them get access to resources to navigate the often-complex regulatory landscape. NLC recently released a brief on [reducing regulatory burdens for small businesses](#) that offers great tips. Policy and public support can be fundamental to accelerating a businesses' positive impact on job creation, innovation and productivity. Governments across the world spend billions of public funds to help more high-quality businesses get their start, grow and prosper.

However, not all entrepreneurs have equal opportunities to succeed. Research shows, for instance, that people of color and women entrepreneurs are often at a disadvantage in accessing support and other resources for their entrepreneurial efforts and businesses. For more information on what works and what doesn't for small business, check out NLC's brief on [What Works and What Doesn't for Small Businesses](#).³

Municipal leaders can also work with city staff to do outreach to immigrant business owners and help entrepreneurs identify resources. Entrepreneurs are not always aware of the services available to them; constant promotion through multiple channels is key. Help dispel negative responses to ensure that small business owners have equal opportunity to succeed, no matter where they are located or what language they speak. In addition, efforts must be made to raise awareness for such resources once they exist.⁴



Addressing Asian American and Pacific Islander Bias, Hate and Violence

APAMO understands that it is not acceptable to place blame on an entire ethnic or racial group for a global pandemic. Asian-themed restaurants were the first to see a reduction in business and an increase in vandalism when the COVID pandemic began. The anger directed towards Asian businesses and individuals was exacerbated by references to the virus as the “China Virus.” This level of racism and xenophobia can be traced back to a long-standing tradition within the United States of vilifying immigrants and communities of color.

APAMO finds these crimes and denigration to the API Community extremely traumatizing and discriminatory. It recalls the history of exclusion, including the Chinese Exclusion Act during the 1800s, the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II, the murder of Vincent Chin and many other atrocities. This history has often tagged immigrants as the perpetual foreigner and the target of scapegoating.

Increased violence against Asian elders and the murder of six Asian women in Atlanta because they were sexualized by the perpetrator shined a bright spotlight on the anti-Asian hate and violence that was being directed at the API community. For APAMO, this rise in hate and violence led to a call that: Enough is enough and the API community are silent no more.

APAMO hosted a Facebook Live to shine a light on the issue of anti-Asian hate. The dialogue highlighted the dangers of and debunked the model minority myth and called on other leaders to join in the fight against hate and violence in the API communities.

APAMO also hosted an event with Women In Municipal Government (WIMG) on how local leaders can work towards ending gender-based violence and how to advance gender democracy by strengthening culturally sensitive advocacy by engaging communities and promoting systems change.

Additionally, APAMO provided a safe space for elected officials to share their own reflections about the traumatizing events of 2020 to strengthen relationships amongst our API leaders and promote self-care, so they are better able to bring continued leadership in serving their API communities.

There is also recognition of the importance to make sure that cities, towns and villages provide community support and mental health resources to those directly impacted during this pandemic.

Entrepreneurship and Small Business Success

Amid the coronavirus pandemic and a rise in hate crimes committed against Asian Americans, the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community has faced tremendous challenges over the past year. The intersection of these two crises has had an especially profound impact on Asian-owned businesses.

A new recently published report from UCLA study finds Asian American small-business owners cited language barriers and lack of online presence as reason why these businesses struggled since the start of the coronavirus outbreak [click here to view the report](#).⁵

The API community has been at the forefront of small business and entrepreneurship, making up 9.9% of US businesses and totaling more than 555,000 businesses.⁶ According to [McKinsey](#), the two million small businesses owned by Asian Americans generate \$700 billion in annual GDP, employing 3.5 million people, and have a collective purchasing power of over [\\$1 trillion](#).⁷ However, these individuals often face more challenges and less access to small business loans or beneficial lease terms to launch those businesses.⁸

To better understand how to serve diverse small business owners, APAMO hosted Fang Fang, CEO of the Greater Austin Asian Chamber of Commerce (GAACC), at NLC's Leading Equitable Communities Summit. The data from the bureau's 2019 American Community Survey show that Austin is now home to 80,117 Asian people. Austin's Asian community is now the second largest in the state behind only Houston, a city more than twice the size of Texas' capital. Meanwhile, Austin's Asian population has grown 71% since 2010 -- and that community's wages have increased sharply to a median income of \$95,000, the highest among all demographics. Texas has the third-largest population of eligible Asian American voters in the U.S. with 698,000 voters. The number of Asian businesses in the Central Texas area is estimated between 15,000-19,000. This is almost a 400% growth in just 20 years.

In April of this year, the Greater Austin Asian Chamber of Commerce partnered with the Department of Business, Government & Society at McCombs School of Business of The University of Texas at Austin to assess COVID-19's impact on Austin Asian businesses, gathering regional data that has been much needed throughout the pandemic, yet long-missing. Here is a quick overview of some of the findings:

- ◆ Seventy two percent of Greater Austin's AAPI businesses remained open but had to adapt their operations.
- ◆ Eighteen percent of AAPI businesses have suspended operations, or permanently closed due to COVID-19.
- ◆ Eighty nine percent of AAPI businesses have lost revenue, with almost 40% of those businesses losing more than half of their revenue.
- ◆ A substantial portion of AAPI business employees have been laid off or furloughed during the pandemic
- ◆ Sixty percent of Asian businesses have applied for financial assistance from various sources, almost 7 out of 10 of AAPI businesses that didn't apply, could not do so because they were unaware of how to navigate the application.

LOCAL EXAMPLE:

How Austin Worked with AAPI Community

The Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce works with businesses looking to create or expand their presence in the Austin region and help them create more jobs. More jobs mean more opportunities for people to find work and provide for their families. This leads to increased community prosperity.

The GAACC announced the launch of the Austin Asian Pacific American (APA) COVID-19 Relief Fund on March 27.

GAACC also works with a number of local APA organizations through a community-wide campaign to save lives by supplying local medical professionals with N95 masks. The doctors, nurses and healthcare staff who are treating COVID-19 patients need these supplies the most. [Click here](#) to read more about GAACC COVID Relief Fund.

In February 2020, before the national shutdown precepted by COVID-19, Austin had an estimated 1,142,400 jobs. Combining job losses for March and April 2020, Austin lost 137,000 jobs, or 12%. In August 2021, Austin surpasses the jobs total it had in the last pre-pandemic month. [Click here](#) to review the job growth and unemployment report from GAACC.

Taking Action

Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities are culturally diverse, resilient and vibrant. However, this community has been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic – experiencing higher risk of exposure, unemployment and economic challenges, alongside an increase in anti-Asian xenophobia and racism. The municipal officials within APAMO are committed to bringing awareness to the disparities within the API Community and to develop change advocates and champions – to help with the efforts toward making change happen. APAMO members understand that advocates can exist at all levels. Supporting Asian communities doesn't have to be monetary.

Municipal officials can show solidarity by standing with the API community, amplifying and combining their voices, following API groups and individuals on social media, signing up for emails, or attending rallies and events in your city (if it's safe for you to do so during the pandemic). Some of these groups in the U.S. include [Stop AAPI Hate](#) and [Asian Pacific Environmental Network \(APEN\)](#), and in Canada include [Project 1907](#) and the [Chinese Canadian National Council for Social Justice](#).



Endnotes

- ¹ <https://ncrc.org/us-immigrants-face-unique-challenges-during-the-pandemic/>
- ² <https://ncrc.org/us-immigrants-face-unique-challenges-during-the-pandemic/>
- ³ https://www.nlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Local-Experiments-in-Small-Business-Supports_FINAL081521-1.pdf
- ⁴ https://www.nlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/CS-Regulatory-Burden-Toolkit_FINAL081821.pdf
- ⁵ http://www.aasc.ucla.edu/resources/policyreports/ABA_Survey_Brief_Recovery21.pdf
- ⁶ <https://www.sba.gov/about-sba/organization/observances/asian-american-pacific-islander-heritage-month-2021>
- ⁷ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rhettbuttle/2020/08/11/conversation-with-chiling-tong-asian-pacific-islander-american-chamber-of-commerce-and-entrepreneurship/?sh=50e40daf4e57>
- ⁸ <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-an-advancing-asian-american-recovery>