



Asian American Organizing Project

APIDA Community Resilience

Convenings

Summary Report

March 2021 - April 2021

## Special Thanks

AAOP would like to thank the following individuals for their insights and support that guided the writing of this report.

### Organizations

- Association of Nepalis in Minnesota
- India Association of Minnesota (IAMN)
- Reviving the Islamic Sisterhood for Empowerment (RISE)
- SEWA-AIFW (Asian Indian Family Wellness)
- Siengkane Lao of Minnesota
- Thai Cultural Council of Minnesota
- Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota (TAFM)
- Viivncaus - Hmong Womxn Group
- Asian American Organizing Project's Staff and Board of Directors

### Funders

- Minnesota Council on Foundations
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- Minnesota Disaster Relief Advisory Committee
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# Executive Summary

Asian American Organizing Project (AAOP) has been a long-time re-granting organization, supporting Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA) organizations in building their capacity around civic engagement and community organizing since 2017. In response to the novel COVID19 pandemic, AAOP pivoted its regranting efforts to support Minnesota-based Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA) organizations in their rapid relief efforts to address the health and economic impacts of the pandemic on their communities. Subsequently, AAOP applied and was awarded funds from the Minnesota Disaster Relief Fund (MDRF) to provide immediate and unrestricted support for APIDA community organizations.

AAOP selected 8 grantees to receive COVID19 Crisis Rapid Response Developmental Grant and convened its grantees between March-May in a 3-part community convening series centered around building resilience in their organizations, responding to racial injustice, and the pandemic.

As part of a broader effort to understand organizational resilience and build a collective narrative, AAOP also hosted a focus group with staff and board members to discuss challenges and lessons learned over the past year.

The connections and insights shared throughout this report demonstrate the resilience AAOP and APIDA organizations have built during the past year to respond to the pandemic and racial injustice in our communities. When trauma causes disconnection, healing requires (re)connection. As a result, by bringing together its grantees, staff and board members, AAOP created space for participants to share their experiences with one another and build collective strength.

The feedback from the convening series and staff focus groups offer some recommendations for AAOP as it considers future implementation around its re-granting program and building organizational practices around resilience.

Some things for AAOP to consider in regards to its re-granting program is:

1. Explore what type of capacity building smaller APIDA organizations are interested in. During the convenings, participants discussed a wide-variety of areas they would be interested in learning more about, including: staff professional development and fund development.
2. Consider creating a program on racial justice leadership development with APIDA organizations. Many grantees felt their literacy around racial justice work in the United States was limited and oftentimes disconnected from their day-to-day work. Without understanding the root cause of disparities in the

United States, smaller APIDA organizations are vulnerable to reacting to community needs rather than responding to racialized disparities.

3. Continue to grow AAOP's re-granting program to reach more organizations. AAOP hired an outside consultant to facilitate its community convenings due to limited staff capacity, as a result the grantees and AAOP staff had limited opportunity to build direct relationships with one another. Building internal capacity for AAOP staff to facilitate convening or build relationships directly with APIDA organizations in the future is important, because staff can provide longer-term relationships with grantees and engage grantees in AAOP's other civic engagement work.

There are two key recommendations for AAOP to consider as it continues to create organizational practices around resilience.

4. When it is safe to do so again, consider holding space for staff and board members to come together and celebrate their accomplishments. Connection is so important in processing trauma and developing resilience. As one individual shared in the focus groups, *"One thing I missed is being together--the space for joy is not always a priority with so many needs and urgency around our work. I would've loved to celebrate with each of you on your accomplishments. I'm hopeful we can gather again to celebrate the wins and mourn the losses."*
5. Lastly, AAOP may want to consider how it can adopt organizational practices around appreciation. This would help combat staff burnout and silos, when individuals know that leaders and other staff recognize their work.

# Community and Organizational Resilience

Asian American Organizing Project (AAOP) has been a long-time re-granting organization, supporting Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA) organizations in building their capacity around Civic Engagement and community organizing since 2017.

In response to the novel COVID19 pandemic, AAOP pivoted its regranting efforts to support Minnesota-based Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA) organizations in their rapid relief efforts to address the health and economic impacts of the pandemic on their communities. Subsequently, AAOP applied and was awarded funds from the Minnesota Disaster Relief Fund (MDRF) to provide immediate and unrestricted support for APIDA community organizations.

In addition to unrestricted grant funds, AAOP hoped to build institutional resilience within and among its APIDA community partners to respond to future crises by hosting facilitated convenings for APIDA leaders to:

- 1) Reflect and share their experiences with one another;
- 2) Identify key needs among grantees and their communities; and
- 3) Co-create effective strategies to support grantee organizations and their programs.

AAOP selected 8 grantees to receive COVID19 Crisis Rapid Response Developmental Grant and convened its grantees between March-May in a 3-part community convening series centered around building resilience in their organizations, responding to racial injustice, and the pandemic.

## Community Convening Series

AAOP hired Jouapag Lee as a community facilitator to lead this work. Convening agendas were co-designed based on AAOP staff and participant feedback and incorporated interactive activities as well as breakout rooms for discussion. All meetings were hosted virtually on Zoom.

A description of each community convening is listed below:

Convening Title	Date/Time	Description
Community Convening #1: Strengthening the	Friday, March 12, 2021	During this convening we'll focus on relationship building with one another and co-create an agenda for our subsequent convenings. Participants will have space to

APIDA Network in MN	9a-12p	participate in self-reflection and guided activities around healing and resilience.
Community Convening #2: Making Meaning of Our New Reality	Thursday, April 1, 2021 6-8pm	During this convening we'll collectively make meaning of this moment and explore what are the opportunities and challenges APIDA organizations and communities face in responding to crises like COVID19 and racial injustice.
Community Convening #3: Building our Collective Resilience	Thursday, April 29, 2021 6-8pm	In this last convening participants will share strategies and tactics their organizations have developed to respond to the pandemic and community needs. Together we'll surface effective strategies to support the APIDA community, heal, and build our collective resilience.

## Strengthening the APIDA Network in MN

The first convening focused on helping grantees build relationships with one another. Some of the grantees were familiar with each other through previous Civic Engagement work with AAOP. However, for many of the grantees, this was their first time meeting one another. It was also the first time for many grantees to be invited by a funder to build community and reflect with one another about APIDA leadership and get to know each other’s cultural communities.

Participants discussed how COVID19 and social distancing had impacted their organization, programs and staff. Five key themes emerged from this conversation:

- 1) Many organizations had to shift from regular programming focused on cultural preservation and connection to responding to basic needs within their communities.
- 2) Many of the grantees were smaller, volunteer led organizations. They recognized there are unique challenges for volunteer-led organizations. Stress on volunteers and their members has limited organizational capacity to respond to COVID19 and community needs.
- 3) Fundraising was heavily disrupted during the pandemic, and fundraising priorities changed. Fundraising that typically happened during cultural events wasn’t possible this year, and many organizations realized they didn’t know or have the capacity to apply for relief grants that may have been available to them or their communities.

- 4) Organizations had to reckon with the digital gap in their communities and their organizations. In particular, digital literacy and tools are much more easily available to younger generations. To reach older generations, organizations shared they had to be creative, (i.e. using mailers) and use multigenerational approaches to sharing information.

Next, participants discussed what they and their organizations would need in order to be responsive and nimble as a network. Participants shared 4 key takeaways:

- 1) Organizations wanted to know more about fundraising in the sector, since many of them are used to fundraising within their cultural communities.
- 2) Organizations wanted to know what resources were out there to help them build their capacity, in particular around fund development.
- 3) The network was interested in more resource sharing and having AAOP convene them more regularly to share information.
- 4) Finally, organizations were also interested in funding that would support their staff's health and wellness. Over the past year, COVID19 has brought staff and organizational health to the forefront.

## Making Meaning of our New Reality

The second convening with the grantees focused on exploring opportunities and challenges APIDA organizations and communities face in responding to crises like COVID19 and racial injustice. At the time of our convening, the trial of Derek Chauvin had just started in Minneapolis.

The convening opened with small group conversation around culture and race. Participants discussed how culture is different from race, and which approach matched their own thinking versus their organization's lens. Many individuals agreed, both are closely intertwined and that there were often generational differences between how young people and older generations identified their cultural and/or racial identity.

After reviewing a timeline on APIDA history, participants were invited to add their own history or their cultural community's history to the interactive timeline. In a large group debrief, participants shared that the timeline activity helped to "connect us all as Asian people..." but also missed individual histories and individual community history.

Next participants discussed the opportunities and challenges they faced in preserving their cultural practices and traditions and in responding to racial injustice. In preserving cultural practices and traditions, organizations named that many Asian



communities are part of a diaspora that can make it difficult to gather community members in a single time/place. However, an opportunity in the pandemic's shift to remote gatherings is an opportunity for connection that needs to continue to be explored. Additionally, another opportunity is that many communities carry resilience around their cultural practices and traditions. This creates connections for our immediate cultural communities and provides an opportunity for us to educate others about our culture and community.

In responding to racial justice, participants shared that there are more opportunities to address differences in the US and some organizations are already working on political issues that impact Asian communities in MN, such as immigration. However, two challenges were named in responding to racial injustice. Organizations felt it was difficult for them to balance their capacity around cultural preservation, economic insecurity and racial injustice. Though these issues are interconnected, many organizations don't have the language or analysis yet that ties these things together. This might be different from individuals within organizations who have a clearer stance on these issues. A second challenge is that some organizations felt they lacked infrastructure or information to address racial injustice. Race and protest rights protections is new information for APIDA communities, in particular immigrant communities that may have come from a different country's political and governing structure.

## Building Our Collective Resilience

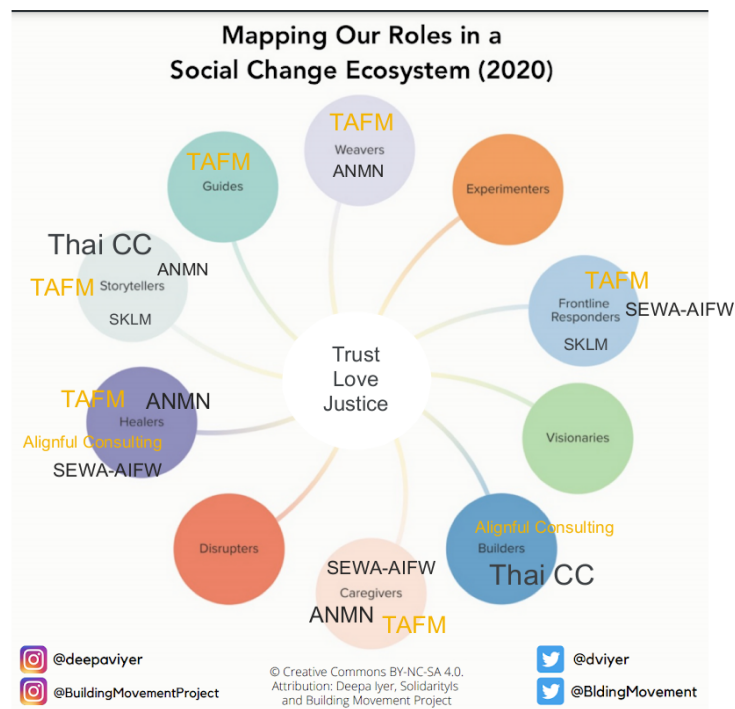
In this last convening, participants shared strategies and tactics their organizations have developed to respond to the pandemic and community needs. Once again, space was made for participants to reflect on local events and the heavy collective feelings. Earlier in that month, Daunte Wright was murdered by Brooklyn Park Police and Derek Chauvin was found guilty in the murder of George Floyd. In their reflection with one another participants shared what was challenging, and what gave them hope. In particular, one participant shared that outside of the AAOP-APIDA convening space, they do not usually have the opportunity to discuss current events around racial injustice with other APIDA leaders. This space was special to them, because it helped them feel as though their experiences around race were less isolating.

Next, participants participated in an activity designed by social justice facilitator Deepa Iyer, "Mapping our Roles in a Social Change Ecosystem." A key aspect of this activity was to help participants think about social change beyond protest and political organizing. Together, the network named values that guided their broader

vision for social change and mapped the social change roles that their organizations played most frequently. An image of this map is included below.

## Mapping

Write your organization's name inside the circles that it plays most frequently. Your organization can play multiple roles and that these roles can shift depending on the context.



As participants reflected on the map they had collectively put together, they recognized some strengths and weaknesses in the ecosystem. The ecosystem was missing disruptors, experimenters and visionaries. As folks explored reasons for this, it was suggested that some of this is cultural-- as Asian culture tends to be very collective and focused on “saving face” being seen as a disruptor was a larger risk. Additionally, there is a challenge of imagination or vision for social change during current painful/crisis times. However, there were many storytellers in the ecosystem and many caregivers and healers, which was especially important during this time of uncertainty in the pandemic.

To close, participants discussed how they could sustain their ecosystem in the long-term and build resilience. Some ideas included:

- Better impacting policy;
- Making sure we're leading;
- Keep taking action, trying things, and be open to see how they turn out; and
- Partnering or participating in each other's events to learn and grow.

## Evaluating the Community Convening Series

At the end of the convening series, participants were invited to participate in a short evaluation survey to provide AAOP with feedback. Eight respondents replied to the survey.

- 87% (n=7) of participants were satisfied with the convening series.
- 87% (n=7) of participants thought the content shared as the convenings was useful.
- 7 participants plan to apply what they learned in the convenings to their work.
- 87% (n=7) of participants thought the breakout sessions helped them learn/understand something new or identify new ways to do their work.
- 7 participants believed the event met their needs for self-care and renewed their resilience in their work.
- 7 participants felt safe and respected during the convening.
- 75% of participants would be interested in continuing the community convenings even after the grant timeline.

In addition, participants provided some open responses on what other resources they would like to see from AAOP.

***“I hope AAOP can be a center for our AAPI communities.”***

***“Resources on grants/funding; how to integrate our efforts; next steps for this group.”***

***“Such leadership where our organizations can get empowered.”***

## AAOP Staff and Board Focus Groups

As part of a broader effort to understand organizational resilience and share a collective narrative, we also hosted a board and staff focus group to allow individuals to reflect on COVID19, social distancing and its impact on AAOP programs and participants. There were 10 staff and board members who participated in the focus group.

## Impact of COVID19 and Social Distancing

For staff, a key change caused by COVID19 has been the shift to remote programming with young people and interns. Staff have had to learn how to create

intentional and interactive communities virtually and simultaneously build digital infrastructure for online meetings that could be easily managed and used effectively.

For board members, the social distancing meant less direct engagement with the staff and other board members. For others, remote meetings have allowed better flexibility for scheduling and participation, allowing them to be “better board members.”

## Challenges

As an organization staff and board shared that they acutely felt the challenges of maintaining current programming and stretching to respond to other community events, including: 1) sharing public health information related to the pandemic; 2) responding to racial injustice; and 3) supporting youth during remote learning. This has taken a toll on staffs’ mental health and is accentuated by being unable to gather and connect with each other in-person. For leaders, the pandemic and its economic impact also created uncertainty about AAOP’s sustainability and how to respond to staffs’ mental health and wellbeing.

Youth participants also faced unique challenges during the pandemic. Staff shared that for some youth, distractions from home, or not getting a break from home or family dynamics can be draining on youth. Participants would often share with staff that they were struggling with distance learning or feeling isolated from peers and friends. Youth also worried about getting COVID19 or having family members get COVID19, and with many living in multi-generational families, felt especially vulnerable when public health messages were unclear or it wasn’t feasible to quarantine within their families.

Public policy also left youth out of economic relief, because young people were not eligible for the economic stimulus payments or unemployment benefits. AAOP staff felt strongly that the financial stability and financial needs of young people will continue to be a challenge even COVID19 restrictions begin to ease.

Staff and board also anticipated future challenges as institutions, businesses and organizations transition back to in-person. Some future concerns staff and board members shared were around how to transition to going back in-person. Participants wondered how to balance health and safety in a shared space, and whether the organization is better prepared for future health crises. As a youth-centered organization, AAOP staff also wondered what their continued role for youth will be in the coming months and their role in promoting vaccination among young people.

## Opportunities and Lessons

Focus group participants shared that COVID19 brought to the forefront the importance of holistic and regular check-ins around mental, emotional and social health. Especially in a remote context, where some of these check-ins would happen organically or in passing, AAOP staff had to be much more intentional about creating regular space and time for checking in with one another.

Staff also observed that remote work has been a benefit for volunteers that otherwise wouldn't have been able to engage with their work. For instance, phone banking volunteers from other states were still able to participate because they did not have to come into a physical location.

Another gain for AAOP during this time, has been the way staff and programs have evolved and grown their tools of engagement around digital organizing. As one participant shared, "We had the base, but the pandemic pushed us... in a position where we had to be more creative with our skillset than we had before." In particular, staff felt they have been more creative in their communications by utilizing targeted digital ads and designing digital events and activities.

## Accomplishments

In closing, the focus groups, staff and board members were invited to share their proudest accomplishments or challenges they overcame during the past year. Each participant shared deep and vulnerable reflections with the group. Among them included:

- Being proud of each other for working through challenges and being able to come together to think about shared solutions;
- The increase in fundraising and funding, which is a reflection of the work that AAOP has done and is doing; and
- Proud of the youth and young people who stepped into leadership roles by initiating check-ins with each other, creating new podcasts and zines to share resources for other youth.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The connections and insights shared throughout this report demonstrate the resilience AAOP and APIDA organizations have built during the past year to respond to the pandemic and racial injustice in our communities. When trauma causes disconnection, healing requires connection. As a result, by bringing together its

grantees, staff and board members, AAOP created space for participants to share their experiences with one another and build collective resilience.

The feedback from the convening series and staff focus groups offer some recommendations for AAOP as it considers future implementation and are discussed below.

## AAOP's Re-Granting Program

AAOP's Re-Granting Program plays a unique role in serving and reaching smaller, volunteer-led APIDA programs that otherwise would not be reached by institutional philanthropy. For many participants in the convening series, they remarked their organizations have not yet been engaged by other funders or institutions to build connections with other grantees and reflect with one another. Participants shared repeatedly that having space and time to meet with other grantees and learn best practices, or share resources with one another were one of the most valuable takeaways from the convenings.

Some things for AAOP to consider in regards to its re-granting program is:

1. Explore what type of capacity building smaller APIDA organizations are interested in. During the convenings, participants discussed a wide-variety of areas they would be interested in learning more about, including: staff professional development and fund development.
2. Consider creating a program on racial justice leadership development with APIDA organizations. Many grantees felt their literacy around racial justice work in the United States was limited and oftentimes disconnected from their day-to-day work. Without understanding the root cause of disparities in the United States, smaller APIDA organizations are vulnerable to reacting to community needs rather than responding to racialized disparities.
3. Continue to grow AAOP's re-granting program to reach more organizations. AAOP hired an outside consultant to facilitate its community convenings due to limited staff capacity, as a result the grantees and AAOP staff had limited opportunity to build direct relationships with one another. Building internal capacity for AAOP staff to facilitate convening or build relationships directly with APIDA organizations in the future is important, because staff can provide longer-term relationships with grantees and engage grantees in AAOP's other civic engagement work.

## Building Organizational Practices Around Resilience

There are two key recommendations for AAOP to consider as it continues to create organizational practices around resilience.

1. When it is safe to do so again, consider holding space for staff and board members to come together and celebrate their accomplishments. Connection is so important in processing trauma and developing resilience. As one individual shared in the focus groups, *“One thing I missed is being together--the space for joy is not always a priority with so many needs and urgency around our work. I would've loved to celebrate with each of you on your accomplishments. I'm hopeful we can gather again to celebrate the wins and mourn the losses.”*
2. Lastly, AAOP may want to consider how it can adopt organizational practices around appreciation. This would help combat staff burnout and silos, when individuals know that leaders and other staff recognize their work.