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1. [Pennsylvania Real-Time News](#)

In coronavirus crisis, Asians in Pa. are facing more discrimination and harassment

Updated Mar 28, 2020; Posted Mar 28, 2020



Rep. Patty Kim, D-Dauphin County, holds her cell phone up so Rep. Maria Donatucci, D-Philadelphia, can see the opening prayer as Rep. Russ Diamond, R-Lebanon County and Rep. Andrew Lewis, R-Dauphin County, bow their heads on March 24. Kim is drawing attention to reports of racial discrimination aimed at Asian-Americans in the coronavirus epidemic. Joe Hermitt | jhermitt@pennlive.com

By [Ron Southwick](#) | rsouthwick@pennlive.com

As the coronavirus continues to spread, reports of racial discrimination and harassment targeting Asian Americans in Pennsylvania are rising, advocates say.

Chad Dion Lassiter, the executive director of the state Human Relations Commission, said Pennsylvania must attack “the virus of hate.” The coronavirus first emerged in China and some Asian residents have endured racial incidents.

“We do know there’s an uptick, specifically in Philadelphia because it’s been the epicenter,” Lassiter said. The bulk of Pennsylvania’s patients infected with the virus are [in Philadelphia and the surrounding suburbs](#).

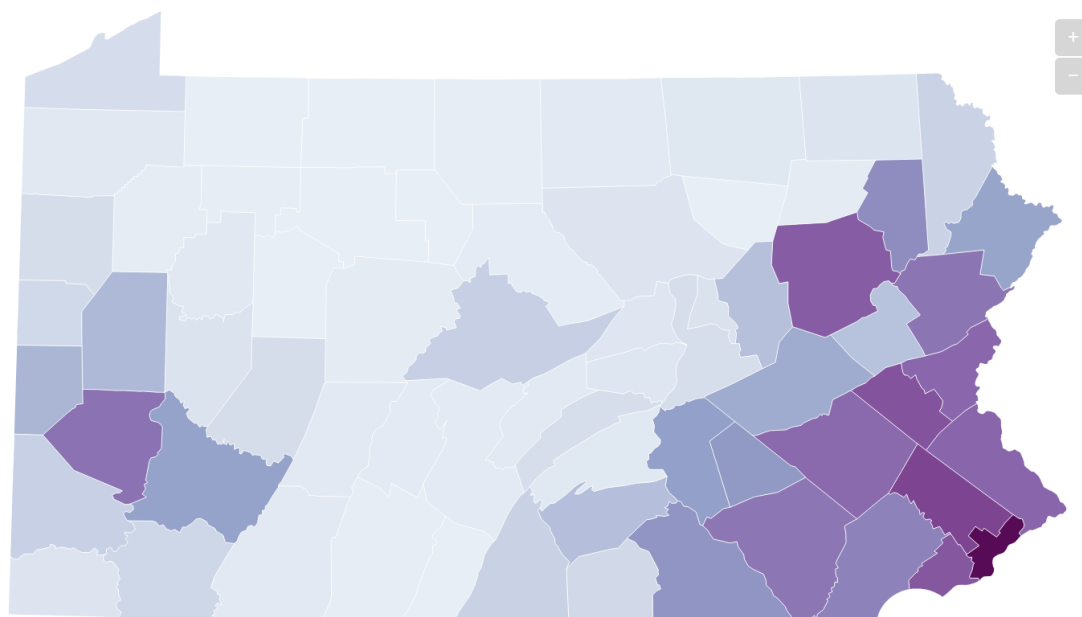
“We’re seeing people boycott businesses,” Lassiter said. “We’re seeing graffiti on property. We’re seeing some verbal confrontations.” Some of the incidents have occurred in Philadelphia’s Chinatown neighborhood, he said.

“It’s not just mean-spirited behavior,” he added. “It’s racism. It’s xenophobia.”

Lassiter expects more cases of discrimination and harassment will be reported as more people suffer financially. Hundreds of thousands in Pennsylvania have lost jobs and a record 3.3 million Americans filed unemployment claims last week.

Coronavirus cases in Pennsylvania

As of 12 p.m. April 12, 2020, the Pa. Department of Health reports that there are 22,833 cases of COVID-19 in Pennsylvania. At least 507 people have died from the virus.



Map: Megan Lavey-Heaton | PennLive.com • Source: Pa. Department of Health • Created with Datawrapper

State Rep. Patty Kim, D-Harrisburg, said she’s outraged by the reports of bias.

A member of the Pennsylvania Commission on Asian Pacific American Affairs, Kim urged residents to understand that the virus doesn’t discriminate. She also reminds residents the state has hate crime laws and an ethnic intimidation law to protect residents.

“The problem is, when it happens to somebody, it’s shameful. People feel vulnerable and want it to go away,” Kim said. “I have a feeling some people aren’t reporting it.”

‘Hostility and aggression’

Around the country, there are troubling reports of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders being subjected to racial harassment tied to the coronavirus.

A new center in California was established last week to track such incidents. The [STOP AAPI HATE](#) center, founded by three Asian advocacy groups, said it has received more than 750 reports of what it termed “coronavirus discrimination.” The incidents are being reported by various Asian nationalities; more than 60 percent of those who filed reports were not Chinese, the center said.

Two-thirds of the complaints involved verbal harassment or name-calling, the center said. Women are three times more likely to be targeted than men.

Manjusha Kulkarni, executive director of Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council, said the number of complaints reported tell only part of the story.

"These numbers do not detail the hate and vitriol that Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) are experiencing," Kulkarni said in a statement. "And they don't make evident the fear and anxiety that community members feel when they leave their homes to buy groceries, pick up prescriptions, or just leave their homes for a walk in their neighborhoods."

Asian Americans United, an advocacy group in Philadelphia, held [a virtual town hall](#) Thursday on anti-Asian rhetoric and violence. Alix Mariko Webb, the group's director, said it was organized to address "the rise of anti-Asian bias we're seeing at this moment."

President Donald Trump and some lawmakers have called the coronavirus the "Chinese virus," drawing sharp criticism from advocates and health care experts who say the term spurs racial harassment of Asian residents.

Earlier this week, Trump said in a tweet: "It is very important that we totally protect our Asian American community in the United States." He added the spread of the virus "is NOT their fault in any way, shape or form."

Still, Helen Gym, a Philadelphia city councilwoman, said in the virtual town hall that Trump's rhetoric has spurred more harassment of Asian Americans.

Gym said the Asian American community "is facing just a shocking amount of hostility and aggression."

She said members of the Asian community of all ages are feeling the impact of racism, either on the street, using public transit or seeing it on social media. Gym plans to introduce a resolution in city council denouncing violence targeting Asian Americans.

"Racism and hate is a virus that spreads," Gym said. "It impacts a lot of people."



Philadelphia City Councilwoman Helen Gym, shown at a July 2019 rally for Bernie Sanders, said Asian Americans in Philadelphia are seeing shocking amounts of hostility and aggression. | Julia Hatmaker | jhatmaker@pennlive.com

Take action

Kim, who is Asian American, said she hasn't heard reports of bias incidents in the Harrisburg region but said incidents have been reported in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.

She stressed that those who witness someone being harassed should do what they can to show support for the victim.

"I've been attacked because of my ethnicity and I know how it feels when it happens," Kim said. "People need to reach out to the victim. It's frightening and they feel signaled out. If you see something obvious, be an upstander, not a bystander."

“Tell them to quit. One sentence: leave her alone,” Kim said. “Send a signal that people are watching.”

Lassiter offered more advice for those who witness someone being subjected to harassment or racial slurs tied to the coronavirus. If someone is being harassed in a grocery store, for example, and you don’t feel comfortable confronting the aggressor, get the store manager.

Another option is taking out a cellphone and recording the encounter and putting it online to deliver some “social media justice,” Lassiter said.

However, he cautioned that people should be cautious about how they intervene in such a situation. If you choose to engage someone who’s already using racial slurs and losing their temper, be prepared for a response, he said.

“I want people to be careful when they approach individuals engaged in xenophobia and racial acts,” Lassiter said.

If someone doesn’t wish to confront the aggressor, another option is offering comfort or solace to the victim when the encounter is over, Lassiter said.

Kim encouraged those who are being harassed to contact [her office](#).

“Some people have no idea this is happening,” Kim said. “I think reporting it gives strength and draws attention.”

Lassiter said he plans to organize town halls in the future to address discrimination targeting the state’s Asian residents.

Those who wish to report incidents of discrimination or harassment can visit [the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission’s website](#) to file a complaint or email the commission: PHRC@pa.gov.

The commission’s offices are closed due to the pandemic, Lassiter said, but the staff continues to work remotely and can offer assistance.

As Kim said, “These stories need to be told.”

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