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Asian American Grant Makers Call on Philanthropy to End Violence and Bias on the Rise as Coronavirus Spreads

By Alex Daniels



AAPIP

Patricia Eng, president of Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy, says the pandemic could be an awakening "from a long societal slumber about the insidious nature of racial bias."

As the coronavirus spread to the United States, many Asian and Asian American philanthropists stepped up. Individual donors, giving circles and Asian American community foundations made emergency gifts of cash and medical equipment to respond to the deadly sickness.

Meanwhile, even as many Asian Americans were exhibiting their generosity, they were being attacked or ignored, says Patricia Eng, president of Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy, a national membership organization of foundation staff and trustees and individual donors that works to direct more money to organizations that serve Asian American and aPacific Islanders in need.

The crisis, she says, has unearthed both the best and the worst of who Americans are as a society. Medical personnel and food-service workers have put themselves at great risk to serve others. But, she says, widespread attacks on Asian Americans who are being scapegoated for the spread of the disease

continue unabated. The pandemic could be an awakening "from a long societal slumber about the insidious nature of racial bias," she says.

The bias, she says, persists even among progressive foundations with multiethnic staffs.

Asian-American staff members are often overlooked in discussions about racial prejudice, and grant makers have not seen Asian Americans as a pressing priority.

Even so, as violence and bullying were directed toward Asian Americans during the first weeks of the pandemic, a few grant makers specifically recognized their vulnerability as a group.

The Nellie Mae Education Foundation, for instance, created a new rapid-response fund called Racism Is a Virus Too to support groups that provide crisis response, training, and culturally sensitive therapy, among other things. And some regional grant makers, including the California Wellness Foundation, have specifically included responding to the needs of Asian Americans as part of the criteria for recent rapid-response grants.

To rally for a bigger response, Eng and Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy circulated an open letter to philanthropy. The letter, issued today and signed by 356 groups and individuals, calls for foundations to include support for groups confronting racism in their coronavirus relief efforts. It also urged grant makers to include Asian Americans in attempts to provide an equitable response and for institutions and individuals to speak out when they witness prejudice directed against Asian Americans.

Above all, the letter calls for philanthropy to emerge from the pandemic stronger and more unified, with the recognition that social gains can only be achieved through trust and solidarity.

"Let's close this country's chapter on the tired and harmful stereotypes along with this novel virus," the letter states. "Our collective health is strengthened by our shared humanity, and our best allies are common sense and good will."

As the letter was being drafted, Eng had a conversation with the *Chronicle*. Following are excerpts:

The pandemic has hit the entire population. How has it affected Asian Americans in particular, and what should philanthropy do?

We know that this is not an anomaly. Bigotry, prejudice, and racism show up with every crisis of this kind. We've seen it on 9/11. It's very harmful, particularly for Chinese Americans. Chinatowns all across the country have been particularly hard hit. There have been at least 600 incidents across the country, whether they were more overt acts of violence or more subtle things, like trying to steer away from Asian Americans as you pass by them.

This racism went viral faster than the virus itself spread. That tells us that it is simmering just below the surface. It can be called up so easily. It is a barometer check that we have such a long way to go on this. You know, everybody's been affected. But with Chinese Americans and Asian Americans — we've had stories of medical personnel who have had the experience of people saying, 'Oh no, I want a different doctor.' Even as they're trying to save the lives of others, they're being attacked. I'm not saying it has to become philanthropy's main focus, but it has to at minimum be included in your strategy at this moment.

How are your members feeling?

It's been difficult for Asian Americans over all, including those in philanthropy. We've talked with our chapter leaders, and they told us about incidents that their children at school faced. They also talk about more subtle micro-aggressions, even in philanthropy, that are more in terms of omission. When Asian Americans are being minimized or ignored in their own working environment, it's difficult because they're dealing also with the external environment

How can foundations address these challenges?

In philanthropy, lots of folks have put out statements, and that's great. Most of them have mentioned the hate violence that is occurring. But it hasn't necessarily shown up in their rapid-response strategies. There's the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, the California Wellness Foundation, and the San Francisco Foundation, which are specifically addressing the needs of Asian Americans.

More foundations should address the viral racism as part of their rapid-response fund guidelines. They should insert equity into their outreach efforts and funding decisions to make sure smaller organizations, especially those in harder-hit communities that are inclusive of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, are part of that mix.

There are grant-making funds that are targeting small businesses, for example, That's really great. But what is happening is that grant guidelines are making it to larger English-speaking organizations. For the most part, there isn't a concerted effort to translate those guidelines to communities that are harder hit, like Chinese American small businesses.

Most of the country is essentially on lockdown. What kind of approach to philanthropy will emerge?

This moment is like a reset button. If we have more time because we are not running around traveling, maybe this a moment to imagine a more holistic approach to philanthropy that really gains new traction toward racial and gender equity. At every crisis moment, we have these kinds of conversations. We'll have different actors, different protagonists, heroes and heroines, but the themes are the same

There's a movement for philanthropy to think differently. The world is going to be a different place when we emerge from this. Every crisis like this is a new opportunity. This moment is looking like nothing we've ever experienced in our lifetimes. So this is the moment for philanthropy to also reset and to think differently and bigger.

Will adversity make Asian Americans a more potent force in philanthropy and building political movements?

That has always been something that Asian Americans have tried for. And there's so many nonprofits that try to bridge across specific Asian ethnicities. We have so many stories of people who are not of Chinese descent being targeted.

Has that led to more organizing within Asian American communities? Asian American organizations, national Chinese organizations, and local Chinese and Asian organizations are always trying to work together. It's not a new experience.

But the crisis is helping gather momentum.

And support has come not just from within. Some of our chapter have gotten wonderful expressions of support from the Jewish community, which has certainly always been a target of violence. And other communities of color have really come out to support us.

Your organization was founded three decades ago. Has philanthropy provided more support to Asian Americans during that time?

There are now a handful of community foundations that are specifically focused on Asian American communities, because foundations really haven't been addressing this. That has to do with the model-minority myth, this idea that Asian Americans are all doing well.

Most foundations have gotten the message that not every single Asian American is wealthy. Not every Asian American family is doing well. There are so many Asian American communities where the statistics around health and socioeconomic indicators fall to the bottom of the list, along with African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos.

If philanthropy wants to really address racial equity in a long-term and systemic way, you can't leave Asian Americans out of that mix. Philanthropy doesn't know what to do with Asian Americans. When there are conversations among staff about racial equity that involve people of color sometimes Asian Americans are actually told to go with the white staff for conversation.

How did the pandemic directly affect your operations?

We were going to have our conference, and now that is canceled. It was going to be the 30th anniversary of our launch, which is a significant milestone. With the scapegoating of the Chinese, it is a difficult time for us to not be able to gather in community. So that's been hard.

What else would you suggest people do to help?

I would reach out to Asian American and Pacific Islander staff members and colleagues. Something as simple as that could really go a long way.

This is a little harder, but it's also important to speak out when you see racism and prejudice. Folks in philanthropy in their own daily lives, they'll go to a checkout line and find that people are moving from them into a longer checkout line because they are Asian. And nobody speaks up. Or in mass transit. Everybody looks, but they don't say anything.

This interview was edited for clarity and brevity.

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