



Asian American Federation

Testimony to the New York State Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Mental Hygiene

February 16, 2023

Written Testimony

Thank you, Chairs Krueger and Weinstein, and the members of the Finance and Ways and Means Committees, for this opportunity to submit a written testimony on the topic of mental hygiene in New York State. I'm Ravi Reddi, the Associate Director of Advocacy & Policy at the Asian American Federation. AAF represents the collective voice of more than 70 member nonprofits serving 1.5 million Asian New Yorkers.

Over the past several years, our community has been forced to grapple with numerous crises, all at once, from a pandemic that disproportionately impacted our small business and local economies, to the rise in anti-Asian hate. And while our community has had to deal with these crises, blow-by-blow, mental health services continue to be inaccessible due to language and/or cultural barriers. Even when these barriers are reduced, the scale of demand outpaces the capacity of services being provided by trusted community-based mental health providers.

The mental health crisis in the Asian community is noteworthy for a number of reasons. Since 2010, the Asian population in New York State has increased by 37.6%, growing from over 1.5 million in 2010 to over 2.1 million in 2020, making up 10.8% of our state's total population. And our community is growing fastest in upstate regions. While having grown by 34% in New York City in the last Census, our community also grew by more than 30% in Rochester, and by more than 140% in Buffalo. Overwhelmingly, Asian New Yorkers are immigrants, with two out of three in the state being foreign-born.

Additionally, language barriers remain disproportionately high among Asian New Yorkers. Almost 40% of Asians living in New York State have limited English proficiency, compared to a statewide average of 13%. And nearly 50% of Asians living in New York City have limited English proficiency, compared to a citywide average of 23%.

While mental health is a difficult subject to discuss in our community—with persistent cultural stigmas across the pan-Asian community—as the crises grow, so, too, has the demand for mental health services. Asian community-based organizations are often the first place where community members go to seek mental health support due to the trusted standing they have in the community. Because these organizations also provide myriad other social services, like connecting our most vulnerable to food services and public benefits, they are best positioned to provide wrap-around services to support the overall well-being of individuals, families, etc., many of whom are struggling with stress and anxiety due to limited access to vital resources. Put simply, mental health in our community has been addressed as a function of all the crises, concerns, and unmet needs of our most vulnerable; and state funding must reflect the full scope of the mental health crisis with a coordinated funding effort to address the systemic underfunding of our community.

1. ***As a part of the \$66.5 Million NY State AAPI Equity Budget, the FY 2024 State Budget must increase funding to \$20 million for the FY 2023 AAPI social service-dedicated line item, “for services and expenses of Asian American Pacific Islander crisis intervention.”***

With the \$10 million allocated to the State Department of Health in the FY 2023 State Budget that is dedicated to “services and expenses of Asian American Pacific Islander crisis intervention,” AAF will subcontract funds to over 100 organizations, including more than 30 in Long Island and upstate. As we are seeing some of the highest rates of growth in Asian populations and influxes of new refugee populations in those regions, we are stretching this funding to make sure community organizations facing high demand can build capacity where it is needed most.

In FY 2024, the State must dedicate \$20 million to this line item so we can not only build deeper capacity in growing communities and support existing networks but also help newer Asian communities gain access to new streams of language-accessible and culturally-responsive services and programs. Many of the over 100 organizations being funded by the FY 2023 budget are operating beyond capacity in our fastest-growing Asian communities in New York City, upstate, and on Long Island, and urgently need the support to meet the level of demand they are facing.

2. ***With anti-Asian violence continuing unabated, and coordinated statewide anti-violence efforts showing substantial results in increasing community resiliencies, the State Budget must fund the Hope Against Hate Campaign at \$3.5 million.***

In our first year of the Hope Against Hate (HAH) Campaign, AAF funded 33 organizations from across the state with FY 2022 State Budget funds to build anti-violence programming aimed at building resiliencies within our community and amongst our neighbors. Between January 1, 2022 and June 30, 2022, HAH partners provided safety trainings to over 2,000 community members in conflict de-escalation, situational awareness, self-defense, and bystander intervention techniques. AAF and our partner organizations also distributed safety videos and booklets to more than 50,000 Americans; connected more than 3,600 clients to victim support services, and providing trainings to 1,400 youth to address the impact of anti-Asian violence.

While anti-Asian hate continues, the Campaign is showing sustained results—not just in strengthening our community and our allies, but also in reframing what public safety means for all New Yorkers. The State must continue funding the Campaign at \$3.5 million, as this statewide effort demonstrates significant and meaningful results in combating anti-Asian hate today and preparing our communities for tomorrow.

3. ***Support the expansion of language access across the state by passing and funding the implementation of legislation that would increase the number of languages covered; expand the number of agencies required to cover them; and update languages biennially based on Census and Community Survey data.***

Language barriers remain high among Asian New Yorkers. Overall, 40% of Asians have limited English proficiency (LEP) in New York State, with Asian seniors having a higher LEP rate of 63%. The Asian American community is not only the fastest-growing racial group in the state, but it is quickly growing beyond New York City, requiring a broader statewide ambit to existing language access legislation.

As part of the Language Access Collaborative, which includes the New York Immigration Coalition, African Communities Together, Masa, and Empire Justice, AAF calls on the State to pass and fund the implementation of broader language access legislation that would cover more languages; provide for regional variance; expand the number of agencies under the ambit of the law; and revise and update the list of languages requiring translation every two years based on Census and Community Survey data. As the most diverse state in the country, New York State must be at the forefront of language accessibility.

The mental health crisis in New York's Asian community threatens to become a public health crisis. If the State makes a significant investment in the community-based organizations on the frontlines of providing these services, they will be helping to address and perhaps avert a greater crisis. State funding must focus on assisting these organizations in delivering the services, as our community members urgently need in-language, culturally-responsive mental health services from those they trust.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify. We look forward to discussing this further with all of you.