

Written Statement of
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Subcommittee
on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties

For a Hearing on
“Discrimination and Violence against Asian Americans”

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CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

Thank you Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of Congress. I am both honored and dismayed to back in front of you again. Some of you may remember that I was with you just this past September, discussing the Importance of Diversity in American Media. You may recall that the reason I was moved to speak then was because the House had just recently passed HR 908, condemning all forms of anti-Asian sentiment, and I was disheartened to find that for a simple bill that required no money or resources, just a condemnation of acts of hate and bigotry against people of Asian descent, only 14 Republicans voted for it and 164 voted AGAINST it. That's 91%. And now here I am again, because the situation has gotten worse. Much worse. Vicha Ratanapakdee murdered, Pak Ho murdered, Noel Quintana, face slashed with a blade from ear to ear, an 89 year old woman set on fire, Tadataka Ono, a professional jazz pianist beaten so badly he can no longer play. And now, 7 Asian people shot dead in Georgia two days ago, 6 of whom were women. These are only a few of the almost 3800 reported incidents since last March. I wonder, will the 164 members of the House who refused to acknowledge us last fall, do so again, canceling the humanity of an entire community of Americans?

I was speaking to a pollster during the recent elections and I asked him why, when I see polling results do I see a breakdown of results by gender – men and women, by age – old and young, and also by race – African American and Latinx, but rarely do I see a polling category for Asian Americans. After I asked why, he looked me

dead in the eye and said “Because Asian Americans are considered ‘statistically insignificant.’” Those words rang in my ears. Statistically insignificant. Now all of you listening to me here, by virtue of your own elections, are more familiar with the intricacies of polling than I am, so undoubtedly, you already know what this means – statistically insignificant literally means that we don’t matter.

Maybe that’s why it’s been so difficult to feel like our government cares about the Asian American Pacific Islander community. After all, it was this very same government who categorically barred the Chinese from entering our country in the first law that prevented all members of a specific ethnic or national group from immigrating to the US. It was this government that refused those of us already living here the right to any path to citizenship, coining the term “permanent alien.” It was this government who imprisoned more than 120,000 Japanese American citizens for simply looking like the enemy, even though throughout the entirety of World War 2, not ONE was ever found guilty of treason against our country.

We, as Asian Americans, come to this country because we believe in the American Dream. We believe that if we keep our heads down, turn the other cheek to bigotry, and work hard, that one day we will receive the full privileges of being American. And many of us have succeeded. We’ve become lawyers, CEO’s, and large number of us are even the frontline workers upon whom we’ve **all** come to depend during this terrible pandemic.

But many of us are struggling, too. The wealth disparity between the richest Asian Americans and the poorest is the largest of any ethnic group in the country. In NY, Asian Americans have a higher poverty rate than any other minority group, where fully 1 in 4 are living below the poverty line. And poverty rates among Asian-American seniors are much higher than the national average. Something to consider as we watch our elderly loved ones get taunted, pushed, slashed and murdered – repeatedly.

Despite this wide disparity of experiences, we continue to be tagged the “Model Minority.” A term that itself only came into existence as a means of comparing one minority to another, thereby pitting all communities of color against each other. Another unfortunate byproduct of this fallacy is that our needs as a community are often dismissed or ignored using the rationalization that “they

seem to be doing just fine.” What is clear through anything beyond a cursory examination is that we are not a monolith. We cannot simply be painted with the broad brush of assumption that the most successful of us represent the totality of us. Within ourselves we are a proud and diverse diaspora, but to those who believe the foolish rhetoric of terms like the “China virus” or the “kung flu,” which some of the members of this very body have been heard to utter, all that matters is that we look different – different enough to attack. And attack regardless of where in Asia our ancestry may be from, or more discouragingly, whether we may even be fellow Americans.

So we know the hurdles we face. The question for us here, is what we can do about it.

One of the places it starts is with education. We must find ways to teach our children the truth about how Asian Americans have contributed to the success of this nation. Let’s teach them how many of us helped build the railroad that brought together the east and the west, but when it was time to take a photo and celebrate the golden spike, were told to get out of the frame. Let’s teach them that the largest mass lynching in our history was of Asian, specifically Chinese, people, in the heart of downtown Los Angeles. Let’s also celebrate the fact that the most decorated combat unit in US military history was the 442nd combat team, a unit in World War 2 made up entirely of Asian Americans!

These are not moments in Asian American History, this is AMERICAN history. When we are erased from our history books, we are made invisible to our own society, and the result is, As Congresswoman Meng so eloquently put it, “we are perpetually made to feel like foreigners in our own country.”
Include our stories. Because they matter.

Beyond education, we must also recognize the needs of our underprivileged communities. Funding to the areas that have been historically impoverished is imperative, not just for the AAPI community but for all the communities living there, most of whom are non-white. It’s no wonder that there has been tension among racial groups when the thing they have most in common is poverty and lack of access to services. We must recognize the contributions of our local community organizers.

And by no coincidence, there happen to be two pieces of legislation that are before this committee, as we speak; one of which deals with this specific issue, the NO HATE Bill. I want to express my sincere thanks to the members of Congress who voted to pass it during its last term. It begins to address many of the very things that community organizations need to do the work vital to their neighborhoods; grants and money to community organizations, counseling for those convicted of hate crimes and improving data collection for hate crime reporting, to name only a few.

This committee also has before it, right now, the COVID Hate Crimes Act introduced by Congresswoman Meng and Senator Hirono. It is crucial that we have reliable reporting of hate crimes, and an infrastructure that makes it easier for people for whom English is not their first language to report. Chairman Nadler, You have been an ally to the AAPI community in the past, I respectfully urge you not to let these bills languish in committee, but push them through so they can be passed by the full House, where I call on Senate Majority Leader Schumer to champion these bills and guide them successfully to approval and finally, into law. Show us, beyond words, that our leaders truly care about our community.

Now I'm not naïve enough to think I'm going to convince all of you to stand up for us. Trust me, I've seen your voting records. But I'm speaking more to the members to whom humanity still matters, more than partisan posturing. Because we need allies. This kind of systemic change absolutely requires it. To solve this issue and ones like it, we must come together. I look to those of us who still believe the words of Martin Luther King, Jr when he said:

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.
We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

There are several moments in a country's history that chart its course indelibly for the future. For Asian Americans, now is one of those times. What happens right now and over the course of the next months will send a message for generations to come as to whether we matter. Whether the country we call home chooses to erase us, or include us, dismiss us or respect us, invisibilize us or see us.

Because you may consider us “statistically insignificant” now, but one more fact that has no “alternative,” is that we are the fastest growing racial demographic in the country.

We are 23 million strong,
we are united,
and we are waking up.

Thank you.