

**Roundtable on Hunger with Congresswoman Scanlon and Congressman McGovern**  
**Statement by Thoai Nguyen – CEO of SEAMAAC, Inc.**  
**June 18, 2021**

Good afternoon Congressman Evans, Congressman McGovern and Congresswoman Scanlon, and my esteemed colleagues.

Thank you for inviting me to speak on an issue that is near and dear to my heart - the issues of hunger and food insecurity within the AAPI communities in the region and the country.

My name is Thoai Nguyen and I currently serve as the CEO of SEAMAAC, Inc. based in Philadelphia, PA.

As a first generation refugee from Vietnam, I know a thing or two about food insecurity as it pertains to the API community and within my own family.

To fully understand poverty and the attending social impacts of poverty such as food insecurity and hunger within the Asian Pacific Islander communities, we must begin to acknowledge the racist and harmful stereotypes of Asian Americans widely asserted in what is known as the Model Minority Myth.

Since the end of World War II, many institutions within our predominantly white power structures have used Asian Americans and the false perception of our collective success as a racial wedge. The effect? Minimizing the role racism plays in the persistent struggles of other racial/ethnic minority groups — especially Black Americans.

### **What Is the Model Minority Myth?**

The myth of the model minority is based in stereotypes. It perpetuates a narrative in which Asian American children are whiz kids or musical geniuses. Within the myth of the model minority, Tiger Moms force children to work harder and be better than everyone else, while nerdy, effeminate dads hold prestigious—but not leadership—positions in STEM industries like medicine and accounting.

This myth characterizes Asian Americans as a polite, law-abiding group who have achieved a higher level of success than the general population through some combination of innate talent and pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps immigrant striving.

### **What's So Bad About the Model Minority Myth?**

While most people agree that negative stereotypes of Asian Americans are harmful, some still question the harm of the model minority myth. What could be so bad about being part of a group that's seen as being successful?

- Like all stereotypes, the model minority myth erases the differences among individuals.
- The model minority myth ignores the diversity of Asian American cultures.
- The model minority myth operates alongside the myth of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners.

- The model minority myth erases racism against Asian Americans.
- The model minority myth is harmful to the struggles for racial justice.

In fact, the Model Minority Myth is so pervasive that even Asian Americans have internalized these false ideals for themselves and their communities.

In a study entitled: Asian Americans as a Model Minority: Self-Perceptions and Perceptions by Other Racial Groups

Using whites as a comparison group, it was found that Asian Americans perceived themselves as more prepared, motivated and more likely to have greater career success than whites. Also, the perceptions that Asian Americans were superior to whites in those three areas were shared by whites, African Americans, Latinx, and Native Americans. In contrast, the other three minority groups each viewed itself as inferior to whites in each of the three areas measured, and were so viewed by the other racial groups as well.

You can begin to understand now why problems of Hunger and Food Insecurity in the API are invisible to the vast majority of Americans. When we are persistently seen as not having any social problems, least of all poverty and food insecurity.

Indeed, while API as a racial group is extremely diverse, with many nationalities, hundreds of languages and dialects, we have been perceived by the larger community as a monolithic group. Thus, in the Aggregation of Data when the entire group is lumped into one, what we see is as a whole API performs better than all racial groupings, including that of whites in Household income, education attainment, and lowest unemployment rate.

For instance:

- 48% of Vietnamese and 52% of Cambodian American adults in Philadelphia are less likely to have a high school diploma or GED than all other racial and ethnic groups.
- About 52% of Cambodian American youth live in poverty, a rate among the highest across racial and ethnic groups, surpassing the citywide youth poverty rate of 35%.
- 61.5% of Asian households in Chinatown are living below the poverty line...
- 21% of Asian residents are unemployed in Chinatown, while 58% are underemployed. With closing of garment factories, entry-level positions have become more scarce. No other industry has been identified to replace these entry-level jobs. Furthermore, only 22% are homeowners, which is well below that national homeownership rate of 67%"
- With the exception of the South Asian population, all other groups within the AAPI community indicate poverty rates that exceed the rest of the state. Alarming, the poverty rate for Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders is over twice that of the AAPI

**The 2017-2019 shift in poverty as counted by the Federal Government shows this:**

## U.S. Poverty Statistics - Race

	All Americans In Category (Millions)	Americans In Poverty (Millions)	Poverty Rate
White, not Hispanic	194.6	14.2	7.3%
Black	43.0	8.1	18.8%
Asian	19.9	1.5	7.4%
Hispanic, any race	60.6	9.5	15.8%

While the poverty rate for the population as a whole is 10.5% the rate varies greatly by race. Blacks have the highest poverty rate at 18.8% and Non-Hispanic whites the lowest at 7.3%.

The Poverty rate for Blacks and Hispanics is more than double that of non-Hispanic Whites.

However, if you broke down or disaggregate the data on API community what you find is this:

Population Group ^	Total Population ^	Poverty Rate ^
Japanese alone	770,546	3.80%
Asian Indian alone	4,094,539	4.10%
Filipino alone	2,911,668	4.10%
Taiwanese alone	164,795	6.90%
Indonesian alone	76,144	7.70%
Laotian alone	212,307	8.30%
Korean alone	1,477,282	8.70%
Chinese alone	4,180,186	10.10%
Guamanian or Chamorro alone	85,771	10.30%
Thai alone	211,384	10.70%
Vietnamese alone	1,826,998	10.70%
Cambodian alone	269,577	11.90%
Native Hawaiian alone	191,739	12.80%
Pakistani alone	499,099	13.90%
Polynesian alone	363,031	13.90%
Samoan alone	105,076	14.00%
Hmong alone	296,069	15.90%
Bangladeshi alone	176,229	16.60%
Nepalese alone	171,709	17.40%
Micronesian alone	169,937	19.50%
Burmese alone	180,474	28.40%

Other factors that contribute to the problems of food insecurity in the API community includes the following:

### Language Access and Acculturation:

A 2018 Pew Research study has shown that speaking only a foreign language or even speaking foreign-accented English is linked to lower income, limited housing choices, and inadequate health care...

In 2016, about 30 percent of Philadelphia immigrants who primarily used a foreign language at home said they spoke English “not well” or “not at all,” while 48 percent spoke it “well” or “very well.” The latter figure was below the percentages nationwide and in most of the comparison cities in this study."

A 2018 PA Governor’s Commission on Asian American Affairs found that, when considering the ability to speak English, nearly 68,000 people (17.8 percent of the AAPI population aged 5+) in the AAPI community cannot speak English well or speak any English. In fact, the AAPI community accounts for nearly 1 in 3 of those residents in Pennsylvania who cannot speak English well or at all." (9)

### **Chilling Effects of the Public Charge Policy that the Trump administration attempted to expand:**

Although AAPIs are a large and growing population, AAPI families throughout the nation face increasing pressure from the federal government. Numerous rules have been put into place restricting immigration into the United States. This multi-pronged attack on immigrants and immigrant families has come in many forms. From a travel ban implementing near blanket restrictions on entrants from entire countries, to separating families and detaining children in cages, the federal government has been pushing its anti-immigrant agenda with fervor. Another key and overlooked part of this anti-immigrant agenda is an attack on low-income immigrant families and public benefits.

Despite the “model minority” myth attached to AAPIs, an estimated 3.8 million AAPIs live in families that have at least one family member receiving public benefits.

While millions of AAPIs struggle with the necessities of life, the federal government has attempted to make it more difficult for these low-income immigrant families to enter the country and to apply for green cards. The administration is attempting to accomplish this by drastically redefining public charge, a relatively obscure part of immigration law, in order to make it more restrictive and punitive towards immigrants.

### **Shame:**

In a study conducted on the use of the Food Stamp Program by API Senior Citizens, found that many Korean-speaking participant and nonparticipant seniors were afraid of putting too much financial stress on their children by asking them for help, but did not want to go to the government for assistance because they might bring shame to their family. As a result, several discussants said that some Korean seniors who need help with food assistance don't seek it and keep their food insecurity hidden from their family and community, suffering in silence.

**On top of these ongoing barriers, in 2020 during the pandemic, the API community has had to contend with additional obstacles, these include:**

- Fear of contracting the Corona Virus
- Anti-Asian Violence - Fear of being attacked as API became the scapegoat for the government’s mishandling of COVID-19
- Disinformation – the API community was heavily targeted with misinformation ranging from false scientific information on the Corona Virus, to false information on being ineligible for COVID

Relief assistance, to falsehoods on the dangers of the Black Lives Matter that rose in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder by the police.

Understanding these barriers SEAMAAC has had to use multiple approaches to address the issues of hunger and food insecurity in the API communities these past 16 months. Providing over 500,000 unique instances of food security to Philadelphians. For an organization that was not able to address the problems of hunger prior to the pandemic, this is a significant increase for us.

- Provision of Language Access to more than 20 languages and dialects
- Safety to guests and clients
- Warm and Welcoming attitudes
- Home Deliveries to home bound individuals and senior citizens
- Multiple weekly calls to isolated individuals
- Provisions of technology to help folks stay in touch
- A firm belief that this work is not an act of charity but one of social justice and equity

**What we've seen:**

API guests by far represented the majority of those in need of our food security services, in almost every aspects of our hunger relief efforts:

- Daily meals: 40% API
- Food Pantry: 60% API
- Food Box Distribution: 35% API
- Home Delivery: 80% API

In May 2020, SEAMAAC joined the Step Up to the Plate program and began serving 500+ fresh meals daily at Francis Scott Key School. By purchasing these meals from local, immigrant-run restaurants, we helped direct millions of dollars back into the local businesses hit hardest by the pandemic. Our 7-week initiative just passed the one-year mark and is expected to continue through September 2021.

Since April 2020, we have partnered with South Philly Barbacoa and The 215 People's Kitchen to provide over 50,000 dinners to date. We have also partnered with Share Food and distributed more than 60,000 food boxes. Additionally, we serve 500 households weekly through our food pantry in partnership with Share Food. SEAMAAC's continued partnership with Caring for Friends, Sharing Excess, Philabundance, and many others has allowed us to continue providing food security to more than 2,000+ household weekly.

SEAMAAC has always been committed to providing food security to marginalized communities as part of our racial and social justice work.