



ASIAN AMERICANS ATTAINING AWARENESS

Asian Americans Attaining Awareness (AAAA) is a community-based collaborative that works to address mental health disparities across Houston's Asian communities. The AAAA collaborative was founded by the nonprofit Asian American Health Coalition which operates HOPE Clinic, a Federally Qualified Health Center that provides culturally competent care for underserved Asian communities. AAAA has worked to deeply engage residents in the neighborhoods they work in to understand and address barriers to care for improved community mental health and wellbeing.

AAAA, a coalition of organizations including HOPE Clinic, serves the greater Southwest Houston area. HOPE Clinic was founded by the Asian American Health Coalition in response to a growing number of Asian immigrants facing challenges receiving healthcare or resources due to language and cultural barriers. Starting as a small, volunteer-run clinic serving a limited population, HOPE Clinic has grown to four physical locations serving primarily immigrant communities across Houston with services available in 30 different languages. Along with providing healthcare and mental health services, HOPE Clinic provides education, training, and outreach to local communities to foster improved social connections and solidarity.

As the AAAA collaborative was forming, having diverse partners at the table representing the breadth of the Asian community was imperative. Long-standing partners from the nonprofit sector include India House, Boat People SOS, the Chinese Community Center, People Caring

for Community Inc., and Culture of Advancing Health Together (CHAT), who all work to unite and improve the wellbeing of underserved Asian and immigrant communities. To address the unique concerns and opportunities for youth and families who belong to these communities, AAAA further partners with YMCA International, DePelchin's Children's Center, and Olive Branch Muslim Family Services to meet and work with residents where they usually gather.

AAAA has built capacity among partner organizations and clinics to reduce stigma related to seeking mental healthcare, address barriers to healthcare, and offer culturally responsive and holistic services. With their participation in the Communities of Care Initiative over recent years, AAAA has played a critical role in solidifying the importance of discussing and addressing mental health and mental illness in Houston's multiethnic Asian communities.

GATHERING DATA TO TELL THE STORY OF ASIAN COMMUNITIES

As AAAA sought to better understand the landscape of Asian American mental health, the collaborative undertook a large-scale effort to collect data across the communities they worked with. Drawing from Prevention Institute's [THRIVE Framework](#), AAAA distributed

comprehensive questionnaires to assess resident priorities for their health and community wellbeing and gather data related to health outcomes. Through analyzing over 2000 survey results and deeper engagement with residents through a series of focus groups, AAAA found that community members wanted to prioritize shifting norms to destigmatize mental health, building supportive and trusting relationships between youth and adults, and emphasizing cultural competency and resource-sharing within their communities.



In addition to synthesizing community priorities, AAAA also assembled a robust dataset of health outcomes from diverse cultural and ethnic groups that are traditionally overlooked in research. AAAA leaders observed that there was significant hesitancy in the Asian communities they worked with to openly share information in the research process. Some of this, they noticed, seemed to stem from unfamiliarity with research, lack of trust in outside communities, and concerns about privacy and what their data would be used for.

“When there is no research, there will be no data. And when there is no more data no one will address needs, and when the needs are not addressed, then things will remain the same. For the Asian community...research is so important.” - **Anila Khan**

AAAA hopes that the data they’ve collected and work done alongside diverse ethnic communities can be shared with research groups, helping to uncover disparities in health that are often concealed by the oversimplified race classification of “Asian.” As AAAA continues to work with interns and students coordinating community-based research projects, they hope to share authentic

ways researchers and academia can engage with community members and continue building shared trust around mental health and research.

MAKING MENTAL HEALTH A COMMUNITY CONVERSATION

In many Asian cultures, mental health is a taboo subject and is not always recognized as a real health concern that one can seek treatment for. Tracing back to a variety of cultural beliefs, mental health concerns are often seen as a weakness to hide or manage alone, rather than face embarrassment or shame in trying to get help. This norm, combined with experiences of intergenerational and community trauma, experiences of racism, and displacement creates unique challenges for organizations trying to provide mental health resources for immigrant communities.

“Sometimes [our clients] feel like when you want to talk about mental health, it’s a luxury conversation, when they don’t have a job, they don’t have work, they don’t have a car,” explains **Maisaa Zaza, a leader at The Future Beyond Charity.**

AAAA seeks to destigmatize mental health by creating accessible entry points into the conversation, including creating safe spaces for open dialogue among adults and youth, hosting community events, and building trust within the community. AAAA worked with community centers and local radio stations to host a series of conversations on mental health for youth and their families.





Supported by organizational partners and leaders across Houston representing the breadth of Asian communities, the collaborative organized their Chai Time programming, named after the colloquially-known tradition of setting aside time to drink chai (tea) and relax as a family in South Asian communities. AAAA uses Chai Time conversations to engage parents on taboo or difficult topics like mental health and racism in a relaxed setting, leading to rich and authentic discussions that make a meaningful impact on residents.

AAAA also worked to build capacity for youth, families, and community members to better talk about and recognize signs of poor mental health in their communities through Mental Health First Aid training. This training incorporated resources, action plans, and facilitated exercises for residents to feel confident and able to support community members in need, further breaking down the stigma against seeking help for mental health issues.

MOVEMENT TOWARD LANGUAGE JUSTICE AND SOLIDARITY

The collaborative champions language justice as a foundation for ensuring access to mental health resources. For instance, AAAA has translated a mental health assessment survey into various languages, including Hindi, Urdu, Arabic, Vietnamese, Mandarin, and more, while being mindful of the cultural nuances and messages that words convey in each language. They recognize that accurate mental health data depends on whether people truly understand and relate to the questions being asked—something English-only surveys often fail to achieve for many Asian communities in Houston. By making assessments linguistically and culturally accessible, AAAA can

gather more meaningful data, which in turn informs better service and program planning.

The intersection of culture and language

Collaborative partners and coordinators share one story that comes to mind when discussing the complexities of relying solely on English words and phrases in surveys. On a standardized screening tool, one of the questions presented is “Do you feel blue?” Collaborative leaders say that, while some people understand what that means, many others don’t understand what it means to feel a color. “These are things that have to be dealt with, that are important to bring out,” Karin Dunn of HOPE Clinic says.

At events and in other communications, AAAA has also carefully ensured that multiple languages are represented. By recruiting facilitators who are native speakers and trusted in their ethnic communities, AAAA helps ensure that mental health conversations are accessible and affirming. Asian communities across the country, including in Houston, often exist in their own ethnic siloes. Though uniting around their ethnicity, culture, and language is critical, so is cross-ethnic and racial solidarity.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the desire for solidarity, as many Asians and Asian Americans across the country became the target of anti-Asian hate crimes and racism. Those connected to AAAA echoed that the community needed to understand and learn that racism—between races, and within the Asian community—is present and has an impact on their health.

"It was very important to understand that there is something called racism, because the Asians that are immigrating or just immigrated are in survival mode," former collaborative coordinator Anila Khan shared. "We have this inner ability to internalize things—this is how we have been brought up, not to say anything and just be part of the system. But, as a community, we need to understand, what is race? What is racial injustice?"

AAAA continues to work with organizations representing a multitude of ethnicities and cultures to understand and act on barriers like systemic racism that can create negative impacts on youth mental health and community wellbeing.

ADVOCATING FOR REPRESENTATION TO IMPROVE WELLBEING

In the past year, AAAA has increasingly dedicated their efforts toward understanding and exploring avenues to engage in policy change. Small policy changes, including changes AAAA seeks to make within HOPE clinic itself, and more sweeping policy changes, including expanding access to culturally and linguistically competent providers that AAAA recently advocated for, can have significant impacts.

Collaborative coordinator Uttam Gyawali

shared: "I do want to look into more upstream solutions, because in order to have this program have longevity, I feel like the impact from the data that we already have has to reach further. So we're recruiting some interns as of now to help us with that type of work, in addition to continuing the work that our community partners have been doing in creating spaces for people to talk about their problems and talk about their lives."

Uttam Gyawali, who served as a youth intern for the collaborative and has recently taken on the role of collaborative coordinator, has made strides toward increasing AAAA's presence in the policy and advocacy space. Along with their continued work of community engagement, AAAA is working with partner organizations and elected officials like Gene Wu to provide youth with advocacy training and experience in testifying at the Texas State Legislature alongside diverse community collaboratives with a

shared interest in youth mental health and racial justice.

The AAAA collaborative has found a balance of meeting immediate needs of the community with building capacity for community and systems change through their youth internship training programs. Their work has translated into wins for the community, including more open acknowledgment of mental health and mental illness, access to more linguistically and culturally appropriate services, and a deeper capacity among youth and residents to engage in shared advocacy.



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