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Iowa

The Honorable Kim Reynolds  
Governor of Iowa  
Iowa State Capitol  
1007 E Grand Ave #101  
Des Moines, IA 50319

May 15, 2020

Re: COVID-19 and Asian and Pacific Islander American discrimination

Dear Governor Reynolds:

The ACLU of Iowa and the 32 undersigned human rights agencies and commissions and civil rights organizations write to express our grave concern over the increasing incidents of hate, discrimination, and violence against Asian and Pacific Islander (API) Americans—a community of all immigration statuses.

May is Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month, and we want to ensure a respectful and empowering legacy for all Iowans as we respond to the current public health crisis. As of early this year, API populations in Iowa have faced even more racism and bigotry than in decades past. This is an opportune moment for you to call for a joint effort to be supportive of one another as we respond to the COVID-19 in the interest of community development as well as individual character and integrity.

We urge your office to send a public message that attacks against Asian populations and the scapegoating of Chinese Americans in particular, is unacceptable and that Asians are an integral part of Iowa communities.<sup>1</sup> Members of many of the undersigned organizations who work closely with API community members have received numerous anecdotal reports of derogatory and harmful comments directed at these community members. Reports include things like people moving away from individuals, staring at them with hostility, and commenting that they are to blame for the virus and its impact. Most of these concerns are expressed as part of incidental conversations and not as formally reported complaints. This is not

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<sup>1</sup> Andrea Sahouri and Suzanne Behnke, *Asian Iowans see increased xenophobia, harassment during coronavirus pandemic*, Des Moines Register (April 28, 2020) <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/2020/04/28/coronavirus-in-iowa-asian-racism-discrimination-xenophobia-harassment-pandemic-covid-19/2950959001/>

unusual, given that not all incidents rise to a level that can sustain a formal legal complaint and, culturally, many community members would find complaining to be an inappropriate response to events such as these.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to take an increasing toll on our country, Asians in the United States have experienced alarming levels of harassment as well as physical attacks. In the timespan of two weeks, Asian and Pacific Islanders Americans have reported experiencing over 1,100 racist acts.<sup>2</sup> Reports of physical violence against Asians—and those perceived to be Asian—in the United States have exponentially increased. In California, a sixteen-year-old student was hospitalized after being physically assaulted at school over inaccurate racial stereotypes related to the coronavirus.<sup>3</sup> In New York, a twenty-three-year-old woman was punched in the face by a man who yelled expletives at her connected to the coronavirus, and another man was verbally harassed and sprayed with what appeared to be air freshener by a fellow passenger on the New York City subway.<sup>4</sup> In Texas, three family members, including two children, were stabbed at a Sam's Club by a man who associated them with the coronavirus.<sup>5</sup> These stories reflect an alarming trend that shows no signs of slowing.

This is not the first time that marginalized communities—including people of Asian and Pacific Islander descent—have faced increasing harassment and violence in the face of a national emergency. After a wave of immigration from China to California in the late 1800s, Asians in the United States were targeted using racist stereotypes that developed into policies and laws, such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which was not fully repealed until national quotas were eliminated in 1952.<sup>6</sup> During World War II, the U.S. government actively fabricated smears against Japanese people in the United States, including in filings before the Supreme Court, resulting in the mass incarceration of people of Japanese descent, including U.S. citizens, in internment camps. Just days after September 11, 2001, Muslim, Middle Eastern, and South Asian communities faced a spike of hate crimes, including some homicides;<sup>7</sup> and discriminatory policies followed.

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<sup>2</sup> Press Release, Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council and Chinese for Affirmative Action, *STOP AAPI HATE Receives over 1,100 Incident Reports of Verbal Harassments, Shunning and Physical Assault in Two Weeks* (April 3, 2020), [http://www.asianpacificpolicyandplanningcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/Press\\_Release\\_4\\_3\\_20.pdf](http://www.asianpacificpolicyandplanningcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/Press_Release_4_3_20.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> *Teen Student in LA Assaulted as Coronavirus Fears Stoke 'Racial Backlash'*, CBS Los Angeles (Feb. 13, 2020), <https://losangeles.cbslocal.com/2020/02/13/teen-student-in-la-assaulted-as-coronavirus-fears-stoke-racial-backlash/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ewan Palmer, *New York Police Investigating Two Alleged Coronavirus-Inspired Hate Crimes Occurring on Same Day*, Newsweek (Mar. 13, 2020), <https://www.newsweek.com/coronavirus-new-york-asians-hate-crime-chinese-1492216>.

<sup>5</sup> *FBI Calling Stabbing at Midland Sam's a Hate Crime*, CBS7 (March 30, 2020), <https://www.cbs7.com/content/news/FBI-calling-stabbing-at-Midland-Sams-a-hate-crime-569233691.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Lee, *Coronavirus Fears Show How 'Model Minority' Asian Americans Become the 'Yellow Peril'*, NBC (Mar. 9, 2020), <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/coronavirus-fears-show-how-model-minority-asian-americans-become-yellow-ncna1151671>.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g., Rana Sodhi & Harjit Sodhi, *Remembering Balbir Singh Sodhi, Sikh Man Killed in Post-9/11 Hate Crime*, Story Corps (Sept. 14, 2018), <https://storycorps.org/stories/remembering-balbir-singh-sodhi-sikh-man-killed-in-post-911-hate-crime/>.

With the rise of COVID-19, fear is once again driving racism and creating an environment rampant with acts of hate and violence in which many Asians in America are afraid to go out to seek basic necessities. COVID-19 is devastating communities all over the United States. Fear and anxiety are a constant, which is why it is so important that people don't have to fear being targets of racist attacks on top of the pandemic.

It is the duty of public officials to uphold the civil and constitutional rights of all individuals regardless of race, ethnicity, nationality, disability, income, or any other protected characteristic. As in past moments of national crisis, the leadership of our elected officials will shape not only the impact of the moment itself, but also the ongoing impacts of racism in our communities. The silence of our elected officials, or worse, their tacit support of those engaged in harassment and violence, contributes to this environment and emboldens these attacks. No one should be afraid to seek out their basic necessities, let alone be harassed or attacked.

While viruses recognize no distinction among their human hosts, Chinese people in particular and Asian/Pacific Islander Americans in general have been the target of vastly increased racist attacks since the pandemic began. The World Health Organization has specifically cautioned against using proper nouns in naming viruses. Nevertheless, some news outlets and public figures persist in calling the Coronavirus the "Chinese" or "Wuhan" virus. This must stop.

We urge you, Governor Reynolds, as an elected official and representative of *all* Iowans to issue a statement declaring that hate, racism, harassment, stigmatization, and discrimination are inhuman and send the message that you will not tolerate any overt or covert victimization of Iowans over COVID-19. In these times, your leadership is crucial to the treatment of Iowans and their safety and security. Racism is deadly in uneventful times. With the world in the grip of a pandemic, economies shut down, and tensions high, it is an even greater threat. In order to prevent the mistakes of the past, we urge your office to use the tools at its disposal to denounce the spread of xenophobia and racism and the misinformation driving them.

If you have questions or would like to discuss these recommendations further, please contact Daniel Zeno, ACLU of Iowa policy and advocacy director, at [daniel.zeno@aclu-ia.org](mailto:daniel.zeno@aclu-ia.org), or at 515-207-3417.

Sincerely,



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