

Southeast Asian American Equity Agenda: Our Community's Priorities for 2023-2024

OUR MISSION

SEARAC is a national civil rights organization that builds power with diverse communities from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam to create a socially just and equitable society. As representatives of the largest refugee community ever resettled in the United States, SEARAC stands together with other refugee communities, communities of color, and social justice movements in pursuit of social equity.

Southeast Asian American (SEAA) is a political identity that comes from our shared experience as people who came to this country as refugees from the US occupation of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. The SEAA community numbers over 3 million,¹¹ and most of us arrived in the United States as refugees, are the children of refugees, were sponsored by refugee families, or arrived as immigrants. Yet socioeconomic, educational, health, and immigration challenges, stemming from SEAA's unique refugee and resettlement experiences, are often overlooked and masked behind the broader Asian American "model minority" myth.



OUR COMMUNITY-CENTERED PROCESS

The SEAA Equity Agenda was created through input and data collected from SEAA-led community organizations across the United States. SEARAC staff interviewed more than 30 key partners from over 10 states. These organizations serve diverse roles within our

¹¹ American Community Survey (ACS) – US Census Bureau, 2021 1-year estimates

communities and are particularly attuned to the strengths and needs of SEAs. They include organizations that address issues related to education, health, and immigration.

2023-2024 Community Priorities

IMMIGRATION

Restore humanity to the US immigration system – Our deeply flawed immigration system creates incredible damage, and those harms are further compounded because the immigration system intersects with racial injustice and over policing issues. SEAA communities want a fair chance to thrive, but we cannot do so while we are subject to a dehumanizing immigration system that fails to see its own flaws. Among other steps, SEAA community organizations advocate for the passage of the **New Way Forward Act**, which would transform the US immigration enforcement system by restoring due process protections for all immigrants, including immigrants in deportation proceedings.

End the unjust deportation of SEAs – More than 15,000 SEAs face deportation. Most of these individuals resettled in the United States as refugees, were born in refugee camps, or have never even lived in their countries of origin. Current policies subject our community members to double punishment by separating them permanently from their children and families, even though they have already served their time. The **Southeast Asian Deportation Relief Act** is a historic bill that would limit Southeast Asian deportations and provide further protections for those with final orders of removal.

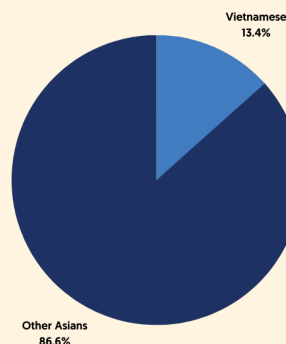
70% of SEAA-led organizations identified immigration reform or deportation defense as a top priority for their community.*

*According to 2023 SEAA Equity Agenda survey and interview data



 SEARAC

More than 230,000 individuals from Vietnam are waiting to be reunited with their families and currently stuck in the immigration backlog.*



*The US State Department does not report the backlog from Cambodia or Laos.

 SEARAC

Protect family immigration – Our SEAA community opposes efforts that threaten our family-based immigration system and supports policies that will ensure families are reunited.

Protect individuals from double punishment – State governors often have the power to grant clemency (a pardon, commutation, or reprieve) and in some cases, end the risk of deportation based on an underlying conviction. SEAA communities advocate for governors to use the tools available to them to address the flaws that our government has otherwise been unable to fix. We also advocate for state governments such as the California legislature to dismantle state-level incarceration and immigration systems that disproportionately harm SEAA communities.

Right to come home – SEAA folks who have been deported should have the opportunity to return to their homes and communities in the United States.

EDUCATION

Robustly fund programs that ensure culturally responsive, diverse, and affirming learning environments – Southeast Asian American history is a part of American history, and all students benefit from learning about our communities' unique stories and experiences. We urge increased support for state and local ethnic studies programs and Southeast Asian American history, increased federal funding to support language access for SEAA languages, multilingual or English learners and their families, and increased funding and support for the Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions Program. In California, we advocate for language equity, support and resources, and meaningful ethnic studies curricula in our education systems.

Due to decades of disinvestment in SEAA communities & public schools,

- Vietnamese American students are 2.7x more likely ...
- Hmong American students are 2.3x more likely ...
- Lao American students are 3x more likely ...
- Cambodian American students are 3.2x more likely ...
- Burmese American students are 5.4x more likely ...
- Bhutanese American students are 6.2x more likely ...

...not to have a high school diploma,
when compared with white students.

Source: AAPI Data, 2022



Provide out-of-school and enrichment opportunities for SEAA students to learn and thrive – Our partners described a need for youth mentorship in SEAA communities. School, district, and local partnerships with SEAA-serving community-based organizations can invest in implementing programs that support civic, educational, and other knowledge and skills to help SEAA students succeed in and out of school.

Listen to and meaningfully engage SEAA youth – Our youth have the power and agency to create change in their learning environments and advocate for their needs. Policymakers should center youth and students when crafting education policy. In California, we

convene the **Coalition to Achieving Racial and Gender Equity (CHARGE)** to provide Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) youth a platform to amplify their voices as they seek equitable policy change at statewide and local levels.

DATA EQUITY

Improve the knowledge of our diverse community – We cannot make sound decisions without sound data. Important policy decisions require a nuanced understanding of facts, and this is only possible when we end the practice of lumping dozens of diverse communities of Asian descent into one broad “Asian” category when collecting data. Aggregating key health and education data conceals the needs of and inequities experienced by our diverse communities. While a handful of states are on the path to collecting and reporting disaggregated data, their efforts are their own, as longstanding federal policies do not require disaggregation beyond the very broad “Asian” group. At the federal level, we support the **All Students Count Act** that would require K-12 education data to be disaggregated by ethnic groups and ensure that all of our students are seen and supported. Additionally, we believe in disaggregating data in higher education through means such as making more ethnic categories available for self-identification on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). In California, we build on the passage of **Assembly Bill 1726** (to disaggregate health data for AANHPI groups) to support and improve data equity efforts across our health systems.

HEALTH

Invest in mental health care – SEAA-led community organizations identified mental health care and wellness as critical health care needs for SEAA communities. This means funding and resources to build culturally and linguistically appropriate services. They also identified the need to support community

Only 5 states currently disaggregate Southeast Asian American student data: Hawaii, Minnesota, New York, Rhode Island, and Washington.



There are only 70 Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) mental health providers available for every 100,000 AAPIs in the United States.*



*The Right to Heal: Southeast Asian American Mental Health in California, SEARAC (2022)



44% of Southeast Asian Americans reported having been victim of a hate crime or incident, the largest of all Asian American and Pacific Islander groups reported.*

*AAPI Data 2023, category listed as "Other SEA"



solutions and different forms of care, and to cultivate a provider pipeline with cultural and community understanding. These investments are urgently needed in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, experiences of anti-AAPI violence, and the lasting intergenerational trauma of war, genocide, and displacement from US-led wars. In California, we support and advocate for improvements and accountability to the state's behavioral health system under the **Mental Health Services Act**.

Increase culturally and linguistically appropriate care – Our communities advocate for policies that improve the quality of health care by increasing culturally and linguistically appropriate services, including healing-centered care, trusted and safe spaces, and language justice. In California, we convene the **Southeast Asian**

American Collaborative, a coalition of SEAA-serving community organizations that provide health and mental health services and inform our advocacy through their direct work and engagement with communities.

Improve access and affordability – Access and affordability continue to be a barrier to accessing health care. SEAA communities advocate for protecting and building on the successes of the **ACA and Medicaid** as ways to improve these issues. These programs have a proven record of helping SEAA community members of all ages. In California, we advocate for health access and the expansion of health care coverage to all, regardless of immigration status.

AGING

Ensure financial security for elders - SEAA community elders came to this country often through incredible feats of strength. Their journeys have inspired movies, books, and multiple generations of leaders. Making it to elder age is a miracle in and of itself. We need to ensure that they can take their journey in aging with the financial security to pay for housing, to afford basic essentials, and to age with dignity.

Increase support for elder care and family caregiving - Family caregivers are a vital and often invisible and unpaid part of our SEAA elder care system. At the same time, competency gaps exist among paid caregivers that prevent them from providing the best care to elders with SEAA backgrounds. SEAA communities recognize the unsustainability of this precarious system. We therefore advocate for investment in culturally and linguistically responsive caregiver training; increasing access to caregiver resources and support networks that are inclusive of diverse communities; and ensuring health care and financial support for all caregivers.

SEAA elders are twice as likely to live in poverty than elders overall, according to the 2010 US Census.



The following organizations contributed to the creation of the SEAA Equity Agenda:

Alliance of Rhode Island Southeast Asians for Education, Asian American Resource Workshop, Asian Pacific Environmental Network, Asian Prisoner Support Committee, AYPAL: Building API Community Power, Boat People SOS-Houston, Cambodian American Literary Arts Association, Cambodian Mutual Aid Association of Lowell, Center for Empowering Refugees & Immigrants, Coalition of Asian American Leaders, Division of SEAA with the Asian American Psychological Association, Empowering Pacific Islander Communities, Families in Good Health - Educated Men with Meaningful Messages, Formerly Incarcerated Group Healing Together Washington, Fresno Interdenominational Refugee Ministries, Hmong Cultural Center of Butte County, International Children Assistance Network, Kandelina, Khmu National Federation Inc, Laotian American National Alliance, Lao Assistance Center of Minnesota, Long Beach Southeast Asian Anti-Deportation Collective, Legacies of War, Release MN8, SEAC Village, Southeast Asian Development Center, The Cambodian Family, The Southeast Asian Diaspora Project, United Cambodian Community of Long Beach, Vietnamese American Roundtable, Vietnam Agent Orange Relief & Responsibility Campaign, Vietnamese American Progressive Association, Vietnamese Culture & Science Association, and VietUnity.