



Asian-American and Pacific Islander Mental Health

Report from a NAMI Listening Session

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) are one of the fastest growing ethnic communities in the United States. Often referred to as the “model minority,” AAPIs in the U.S. number approximately 15 million and represent more than 100 languages and dialects. Nearly two-thirds of AAPIs were foreign born, while 38 percent of Asian Americans (AAs) do not speak English fluently. Most AAPIs live and reside in metropolitan areas and tend to be highly urbanized, with California, New York, Hawaii, Texas and New Jersey having the largest concentration of AAPIs in the U.S.

AAPIs tend to be healthier than whites and other ethnic groups, but further studies reveal a large disparity in health status among subgroups. Research suggests that AAPIs face many barriers when seeking health and mental health services in their communities, including lack of access to care, language challenges and lack of culturally and linguistically responsive providers. Cultural beliefs and values play an important role in how AAPIs experience their mental health issues. The cultural adherence to avoidance of shame and stigma also remains a powerful influence on how AAPIs deal with mental illness—many individuals and families remain in denial or silence about their situation.

Recognizing the unique needs of the AAPI community, the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Multicultural Action Center hosted an Asian American/Pacific Islander Mental Health Listening Session on Nov. 4-5 in Los Angeles. Twenty mental health leaders—people living with mental illness, family members, service providers, advocates, researchers and academics—from AAPI communities gathered to discuss current issues in AAPI mental health.

This proceedings report documents the diverse experiences of AAPIs around mental health, including the many barriers and gaps AAPI individuals and families face when accessing services. It also shares some recommendations on how mental health systems can address these barriers, highlighted below.

- Address the high levels of stigma associated with mental illness through culturally congruent outreach and education.
- Understand the role AAPI cultural values such as strong, tight-knit family connections and avoidance of shame and stigma play in seeking and adhering to treatment.
- Increase and encourage AAPIs to join the health and mental health workforce.
- Encourage and support opportunities for AAPIs living with mental illness and their families to be leaders and advocates in their communities.

- Disaggregate, or “unpack,” the broad term AAPIs and conducting more research on AAPIs especially among subgroups.
- Foster primary care and behavioral health integration to make care more easily accessible to AAPIs living with mental illness.
- Partner and collaborate with local, national and federal institutions to build, sustain and strengthen efforts to address the gaps and barriers AAPIs face when seeking mental health services.

In addition, participants focused their discussion on NAMI’s role in supporting efforts to improve mental health access and services to the AAPI community in the U.S, highlighted below.

- Help to educate AAPI communities about mental health, wellness and recovery.
- Train service providers to be more culturally and linguistically responsive to the unique experiences of AAPIs.
- Act as a leader in advocating for AAPIs’ voices and rights.