

ASIAN AMERICANS FOR EQUALITY
5th ANNUAL ASIAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CONFERENCE

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Thank you, **Wendy Takahisa**, for that kind introduction. And thank you to the incredible **Christopher Kui** and his entire staff at AAFE for organizing this conference.

Good morning and thank you all so much for inviting me to speak with you today. Happy Asian Pacific American Heritage Month!

Earlier this week, President Obama was here in New York to deliver the commencement address at Barnard, the women's college at Columbia University.

I was so proud when he spoke of the late Representative **Patsy Mink** – a Japanese American from Hawai'i who was the first woman of color to serve in the United States Congress. He described the important work Patsy and her colleague **Edith Green** did by drafting Title IX, which opened America's playing fields to women and girls like his two daughters and mine.

This month, we recognize heroes and "she-roes" of Asian American and Pacific Islander history like the great Patsy Mink.

The President also talked about a friend of his, the daughter of Mexican immigrants. "When she was in high school," he recounted, "her guidance counselor told her, 'You know what? You're just not college material. You should think about becoming a secretary.'"

He was talking about my boss, **Hilda Solis**. And she did become a secretary – the Secretary of Labor. Secretary Solis is the first Latina in the U.S. Cabinet and a champion for good jobs for everyone, including nearly 8 million AAPI workers in the United States.

This month, we salute our allies like Secretary Solis.

Finally, the President concluded his speech at Barnard by talking about the trajectory of civil rights in this country. He spoke of the young people who "marched and mobilized and stood up and sat in, from Seneca Falls to Selma to Stonewall." He reminded us that those students "didn't just do it for themselves; they did it for other people."

It got me thinking about that famous Freedom March in Selma back in March of 1965. If you look at pictures of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the men and women marching with him that day, you can't help but notice that many of them are wearing... Hawaiian leis!

How did this ubiquitous symbol of the islands end up center stage in a struggle for freedom in the Deep South?

Well, it turns out that **Reverend Abraham Akaka**, a pastor of the Kawaiahaeo Church in Hawai'i, traveled all the way to Alabama to support the peaceful marchers and his friend Dr. King. He brought with him the gift of white flower garlands – a symbol of peace and nonviolence from his native land.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is **our** history: our Asian American and Pacific Islander history.

It's a history that too many of our countrymen don't fully understand. And that makes it our job to **teach**.

It's also a multi-national, multi-ethnic and multi-generational story that many of us don't fully appreciate. And that makes it our job to **learn**.

As a child, I heard the immigrant stories of my Chinese father, my Irish mother and my Filipino neighbors. However, it has taken a lifetime of experiences – from college and law school to working as a civil rights attorney and serving in this Obama administration – for me to fully appreciate the intersections between the experiences of my parents and those of other Asian American immigrants. And through my work at the Department of Labor, I have developed an even greater appreciation for the persisting challenges that native people of the Pacific Islands still face when it comes to achieving the American dreams of equal opportunity and self-determination.

Asian Pacific American Heritage Month is an important time for reflection, for education and for building greater understanding – within our communities and outside of them.

And let's be honest, when they were handing out months, we did pretty well landing in May.

We get 31 whole days of beautiful weather and May flowers – not to be confused with the actual Mayflower (which had pretty lousy weather and no AAPIs).

We get to spike our margaritas with a little sake on Cinco de Mayo, thank our mothers – Tiger and otherwise – on Mother's Day, and celebrate our graduates – valedictorians and otherwise – at commencement.

And, of course, the whole month ends with a big Memorial Day feast – perfect for dim sum and honoring the brave men and women from our communities who have helped to defend this nation.

Of course, May was actually chosen for APA Heritage Month because it commemorates the arrival of the first Japanese Americans to the U.S. on May 7, 1843. And it honors the legacy of Chinese American immigrants who played a major role in laying tracks for the transcontinental railroad. When it was completed on May 10, 1869, the railroad was considered to be the greatest technological accomplishment of the nineteenth century.

Today, we honor those ancestors and all the other immigrants from across Asia and the globe as well as the native peoples of the Pacific Islands who helped build this nation.

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I also want to honor the board and staff of AAFE who have – for nearly four decades – worked to redeem the promise of our nation by vigilantly protecting the civil rights of our communities. The theme of today’s conference, “Mobilizing Our Community from the Margins to the Center” is apt given the important work AAFE and all of you have done to help define and advance the agenda for AAPI progress.

I salute your work in this arena and am proud to stand alongside you as the head of one of the premier civil rights agencies in the federal government. As Wendy noted in her introduction, I have the privilege of leading a team of nearly 800 men and women around the country who are on the front lines of fighting employment discrimination and enforcing the civil rights of workers. I am pleased to be joined here today by my colleagues **Michele Hodge and Sam Maiden**, who lead our efforts here in the northeast region.

The Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs was established in 1965, by President Lyndon Johnson. Our mandate is to enforce the legal obligations of nearly 200,000 federal contractors and subcontractors to prohibit discrimination and take affirmative action in their employment practices. It turns out that nearly one in four workers is employed by a company that receives government contracts – and those contracts total nearly \$700 billion.

Those are taxpayer dollars – dollars that must never be used to discriminate.

What makes us unique from other employment rights agencies – like the Department of Justice or the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission – is that we don’t have to wait for a worker to file a complaint.

Oftentimes, we find that workers who are subjected to discriminatory practices have no idea when factors that have nothing to do with their ability to do a job unfairly affected their employment.

It’s our job to find out for them. It’s our job to root out both systemic barriers to fair employment and to investigate individual cases of discrimination.

So, each year, we proactively audit about 4,000 contractor establishments around the country. We look at their outreach, recruitment and hiring practices. We solicit information on how they pay their workers, who gets trained and promoted, where workers are placed and why individuals are fired.

We look at all this data to determine if discrimination is a factor. And when we find discrimination, we take steps to resolve it. In 99% of cases, we are able to work with companies to come to a mutually agreeable resolution that compensates the victims of discrimination and creates enduring changes in how the company operates for the benefit of all its workers and for all who seek employment with them.

But in those rare cases when a company simply refuses to play by the rules, we are committed to enforcing the law, even if it means we have to take the rare step of petitioning to end that company's lucrative government contracts until they get it right.

That's how we protect workers.

I believe that the federal government has both a legal and moral obligation to reflect the diversity of our country. It's why we take affirmative steps to ensure equal opportunity in our own hiring at OFCCP, the Labor Department and across all federal agencies.

We believe that obligation extends to the companies that do business with us. And so, for almost 50 years – from Republican administrations to Democratic ones and from one Congress to the next – OFCCP has had the responsibility of **protecting workers**, **promoting diversity** and **enforcing the law**.

We are fortunate to have a President who gets this in a very personal way.

You know, Toni Morrison famously called Bill Clinton our “first black President.” And this week, *Newsweek* anointed Barack Obama as our “first gay President.”

While I'm enormously proud to work for the first American President to embrace marriage equality, I just want to be clear on one thing: we claimed him as the “first AAPI President” about four years ago!

Not only was he born in Hawai'i – the state with the largest AAPI population, but he also shares the immigrant experience so many of us have lived or known through the eyes of our parents and grandparents.

On election night in 2008, NBC news anchor Brian Williams broke the news of President Obama's victory by saying “There will be young kids in the White House for the first time since the Kennedy generation.” What he didn't mention was that there would be Asian American kids in the White House for the first time ever: the President's nieces **Suhaila** and **Savita**.

His story is our story. And, let me tell you, it makes a difference to have a President who gets it, who intuitively and experientially knows what it means to be both an Asian American and a Pacific Islander.

Like the President, I'm from Chicago. I grew up in Hyde Park where diversity was part and parcel of my childhood. The racial and ethnic diversity of my neighborhood – and even within my own Irish-Asian household – was always seen as a positive, as a strength, as something uniquely and perfectly **American**.

When I moved to California nearly 30 years ago, I found that same spirit of diversity and appreciation for our differences there. Like New Yorkers, we Californians like to think of ourselves as the nation's crystal ball – showing others what our country will look like in the near future.

We believe that that with such diversity, we have a collective responsibility to be the guardians of our nation’s history, reminding others of how we got here – from Ellis Island to Angel Island and from Plymouth Rock to Gold Mountain.

That’s why Asian Pacific American Heritage Month matters – it ties our story to the larger American story. It’s an opportunity to educate ourselves and our friends, colleagues and neighbors about the rich history of nearly 17 million Asian American immigrants, refugees and their descendants as well as the native peoples of Hawai’i and the Pacific Islands.

This month, we reaffirm our place in the history of the United States.

We commit ourselves to the notion that – in the words of the great Asian American scholar Helen Zia – we will be M.I.H., or **“missing in history,” no more.**

And we refuse to be perpetual foreigners in our own homes.

That is why we pledge, this month, to learn our individual histories so that we may shape our collective destiny.

We pledge to practice our skills in the emergency rooms, to demonstrate our leadership in the boardrooms, to protect our rights in the courtrooms and to tell our stories in the classrooms.

We do this so that our children and our children’s children will know that we were not guests in this country, that we **are** this country.

Our “AAPI President” understands this intuitively. As he often says, he knows what it’s like to grow up with a funny name and feeling like you don’t belong. He knows what it’s like to have your patriotism, your loyalty, your American-ness and even you’re very citizenship called into question. And he knows how much we have to gain when we break down those barriers and offer everyone a seat at the table.

That is why President Obama, Secretary Solis and I are so committed to ending discrimination in employment and ensuring that a 21st century American workforce not only **looks** like the country, but also **speaks** like, **thinks** like and truly **reflects** the diversity of 21st century America.

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To accomplish that goal, we in the Obama Administration are collaborating across agencies at an unprecedented level. The President believes we must have a unified civil rights agenda for the federal government... and we agree.

Just as intelligence agencies must share information to protect our national security, so too must our civil rights agencies work together to safeguard the rights of all workers.

This interagency collaboration is particularly important when it comes to the Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander communities. In addition to my responsibilities at OFCCP, I also have the privilege of serving as Secretary Solis's representative to the White House Initiative on AAPIs.

This federal-wide initiative was first established thirteen years ago by President Clinton. In 2009, President Obama restored the initiative by calling on 23 federal agencies to join forces and focus on the unmet needs of the nation's fastest growing population: the AAPI communities.

In addition to the 23 agencies that make up the federal Interagency Working Group, the Initiative also includes a President's Advisory Commission, comprised of leaders from our communities. You will hear from one of those commissioners – **Hyeok Kim** – later today. With their guidance and input each of our agencies have developed action plans around five cross-cutting goals:

- 1) **Data** – we are committed to improving the collection, analysis and dissemination of data on Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders. That includes working toward disaggregating – or breaking down – data by ethnicity and national origin;
- 2) **Access** – we will make sure our programs, services and materials are both linguistically accessible and culturally appropriate for the diverse communities we serve;
- 3) **Outreach** – in addition to providing translated materials, we are also committed to increasing awareness and education about the programs and services we offer in the federal government – including grant opportunities, safety net programs, technical assistance and social services;
- 4) **Federal Employment** – we are committed to creating pathways for advancement so that AAPIs are included in all ranks of federal service, without artificial glass ceilings creating barriers to leadership roles;
- 5) **Civil Rights** – and, finally, we are committed to protecting the civil rights of and ensuring equal opportunity for all people, including AAPIs.

Last year, the Department of Labor submitted an action plan that addressed all of these cross-cutting goals and explained how we plan to achieve each of them. You can read our plan – and those of 22 other federal agencies – at www.WhiteHouse.gov/AAPI.

Each one of these goals is important in and of itself. Together they form a powerful roadmap for our communities.

Consider the single issue of data. On the surface, data is not a particularly sexy issue. But I listed it first because, in many ways, it's the most important one. In fact, data collection is the linchpin to good civil rights enforcement.

Here's why:

For many years, Asian Americans have been viewed as a “model minority” because of data that shows comparatively high rates of educational attainment, employment, wealth and other indices of

success. You get enough doctors, lawyers, college grads, IT specialists and violin-playing-spelling-bee-winning child prodigies surrounded by hovering “Tiger moms” and, well, folks start to develop certain impressions about our communities.

On its face, “model minority” almost seems like a compliment, right? Wrong.

When the “model minority” tag is used as an excuse for governments and other institutions to ignore our very real needs, it’s not a compliment. It’s a **disservice** that marginalizes us.

When “model minority” is used as code for enforcing stereotypes that make us seem foreign or “other,” it’s not a compliment. It’s **bigotry** that endangers us.

And when it’s used to foster division between our communities and other racial, ethnic or immigrant groups, it’s most certainly not a compliment. It’s simply **un-American** and it lessens us all.

But data is how we break down the myth of the “model minority” and get to the truth.

Collecting real-time, accurate data shows, for example, that Asian Americans who are unemployed face longer period of joblessness than any other ethnic group – about half of all unemployed Asian Americans have been out of work for 26 weeks or more. That makes the Obama administration’s efforts to extend unemployment insurance for the long-term unemployed vital to the survival and well-being of our communities.

Publishing vital statistics on our communities also lets us know that we are more susceptible to certain diseases – like Hepatitis B – and allows us to get the education and resources to prevent it.

And disaggregating data by national origin and ethnicity allows us to identify and begin tackling the very real disparities our communities face in housing, education, employment and immigration. Last year, under the leadership of Secretary Solis, the Labor Department’s Bureau of Labor Statistics published – for the first time ever – disaggregated data that breaks down the impact of the recession and now the recovery for specific AAPI populations.

Data is the key to good public policy. And at the Department of Labor, we are committed to improving the way we collect, analyze and share our data so that we can meet the Secretary’s vision of good jobs for everyone.

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In closing, let me thank you again for welcoming me here today. I’m looking forward to having a productive discussion with you and hearing your ideas on how we can increase opportunities and improve employment for our AAPI communities.

As an Asian American, I stand on the shoulders of giants – from the Chinese immigrants who built our railway system to the Japanese survivors of internment. I stand on the shoulders of Filipinos

soldiers who fought under our flag and South Asian Americans who refused to let that flag be tarnished by racial profiling.

At the same time, we all stand on the shoulders of African Americans who led the civil rights movement, Irish Americans who fought for the right to organize workers, Latino migrant workers who raised our consciousness about safe and fair working conditions and every other community of immigrants and native peoples who have contributed to the strength of our nation.

We stand on their shoulders, this month and **every** month of the year.

Today, we have a unique opportunity – with the leadership of the President, the commitment of Secretary Solis and the hand of partnership from each of you – to build a new economy and to create a winning future for all workers.

We can and will form a more perfect union – **for all of us**.

Thank you so much.