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## Federal Officials Connect with Midwestern Asian Pacific Islander Community

### *White House Initiative on Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders holds Midwest Regional Action Summit in Columbus, OH*

COLUMBUS – On July 13, 2012, the [White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders](#) (WHIAAPI) convened senior Obama Administration officials and over 260 AAPI community members at a Midwest Regional Action Summit. Held in Meiling Hall at The Ohio State University in Columbus, OH, the Summit followed a series of open meetings with community leaders in Midwestern states experiencing rapid AAPI population growth. (See photos of the Summit [here](#) and read more news coverage of the event in [The Columbus Dispatch](#) and on the [Asian Indian Heritage Project](#) blog).



The Summit was a day of open dialogue between community participants and federal officials, who worked together to:

1. **Establish a space** where community leaders informed the Obama Administration about issues of concern to the Midwestern AAPI community;
2. **Identify federal resources and programs** available and develop solutions to address these issues; and
3. **Develop opportunities** for community leaders to inform one another about innovative approaches to the needs of AAPI communities across the Midwest.

In addition to robust representation of Ohio's AAPIs, the Summit also drew AAPI leaders from Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Minnesota. Participants included Americans of Bhutanese, Chinese, Filipino, Hmong, Indian, Japanese, Korean, Laotian, Mon, Nepali, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Thai, and Vietnamese descent. Administration officials present at the WHIAAPI Midwest Regional Action Summit included Kiran Ahuja, Executive Director of WHIAAPI, and Chris Lu, Cabinet Secretary, Assistant to the President, and the highest-ranking AAPI in the Obama Administration.

Dr. Yung-Chen Lu, Chair of the Ohio AAPI Advisory Council, opened the Summit by underscoring the rapid growth of Ohio's AAPI community—more than 48% over the last decade—and urged participants: “Take the time to voice your concerns...we want to hear, from the street-level, the concerns of our Midwest AAPI communities.”

Ben Johnson of the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) spoke on behalf of ODJFS Director Michael Colbert. Mindful that AAPIs face the highest long-term unemployment rate of any ethnic group in the country, Mr. Johnson directed Summit participants to the [OhioMeansJobs](#) initiative, a website and mobile application which allow job-seekers to upload resumes and search for positions throughout the state. Employers can also use *OhioMeansJobs* to find qualified individuals for job openings.

In her remarks, Ms. Ahuja stated that President Obama wanted to ensure that Asian Americans, as the nation's fastest-growing minority group, had access to all the services the federal government had to offer. She emphasized the need to combat the “model minority” stereotype, which obscures serious challenges faced by significant numbers of AAPIs. “Without disaggregated data, we miss significant health disparities in our community,” said Ms. Ahuja. She added that more than half of the AAPI student population is in community colleges, and that 25% of AAPI households in Ohio have at least one family member not proficient in English. (Several Summit attendees participated through an interpreter.)

In his keynote address, Mr. Chris Lu affirmed that, “The Obama Administration wants to be your partner in helping to maximize the potential of the Asian American community.” He highlighted the benefits of health care reform and small business tax cuts to AAPIs. (1.5 million small businesses in the U.S. are AAPI-owned.) He also pointed to Administration policies that keep student loan interest rates low, of particular importance to the many Asian American families who place high value on education.

Later in the afternoon, Summit participants broke out into plenary sessions on Civil Rights and Immigration Reform, Jobs and Small Business Development, Health Care and Health Equity, Education, and Housing and Home Ownership. Each plenary session featured national AAPI experts, including officials from the Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Housing and Urban Development, Department of Education, and Department of Justice.

At the Civil Rights and Immigration session, Ron Katsuyama, President of the Ohio Asian American Health Coalition and Chair of the Civil Rights and Immigration Impact Committee of the Ohio AAPI Advisory Council, moderated discussions about U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Health and Human Services programs pertaining to civil rights. Questions and comments included how redress of immigration-related discrimination in the workplace can be obtained and how communities can respond to hate crimes and bias-related incidents.

At the Education session, Rebecca Nelson, Senior Special Assistant to the Vice President on Equity, Community and Grants Initiatives at The Ohio State University, guided conversations on the prevention of discrimination, harassment, and bullying in schools. Participants also discussed the need for cultural competency and disaggregated data. Attendees left with a greater awareness of strategies for institutional change to support student learning.

At the Health Care and Health Equity session, Manju Sankarrapa, Executive Director of the Ohio Asian American Health Coalition, moderated discussions about the immediate and future benefits of the Affordable Care Act, the need to increase access to culturally competent health care, and the need for disaggregated health data.

At the Housing and Home Ownership session, moderator Michael Byun, Executive Director of Asian Services In Action, observed lively conversation and dialogue from monolingual representatives of the Akron-area Nepali community. “Specifically, they voiced concerns about unfair treatment by landlords; for example, not receiving full refunds of security deposits upon the end of a lease and not knowing if families had recourse.” said Mr. Byun. He added, “They were thoroughly engaged when given the opportunity to slow things down to allow for interpreting.”

Finally, the Jobs and Small Business Development session was moderated by Dr. Khurshid Ahmad, President of the Asian American Council, Dayton, OH. Dr. Ahmad moderated discussions about federal resources available to small business owners, the importance of networking, and specific strategies to enhance employee selection.

During the Summit Town Hall, participants offered suggestions, made comments, and posed questions related to plenary session discussions. One high school student spoke about how she and her classmates had created a diversity awareness class elective at their school and made diversity training mandatory for their teachers. Another powerful story came from a representative of the Mon community in Akron, OH, who described how a factory worker’s death may have been related to repeated denials of requests for a work break.

Kiran Ahuja closed the WHIAAPI Midwest Regional Action Summit by encouraging attendees to, “Send your recommendations directly to us [the White House Initiative on Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders].”

The WHIAAPI Midwest Regional Action Summit was organized in partnership with community-based organizations from Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin. The lead Ohio host organizations were the Ohio Asian American & Pacific Islander Advisory Council and the [Ohio Asian American Health Coalition](#). Partner organizations included the Asian-American Community Service Council, the Midwestern Asian American Student Union, and the Sikh Coalition.



#### [Ohio Asian American Health Coalition](#)

Established in 2002, the Ohio Asian American Health Coalition is an alliance of communities and individuals focused on the health and well-being of Ohio's Asian American population. Their mission is to eliminate social inequities that contribute to disparities in the quality of life of Ohio's Asian American Pacific Islanders through community research, education and advocacy.

#### [Ohio Asian American Pacific Islander Advisory Council](#)

Established in 2007, the Ohio Asian American Pacific Islander Advisory Council addresses issues specific to Ohio's AAPI population, and connects AAPIs in Ohio to the State's resources. The Council focuses on four issue areas: Economic and Workforce Development; Health Issues and the Health Care System; Art, Culture, and Education; and Civil Rights and Immigration Impact.