OFFICERS

John C. Yang; Chair; Advancing Justice | AAJC
Jeffrey Caballero; AAPCHO
Becky Belcore; NAKASEC
Seema Agnani; National CAPACD
David Inoue; JACL
Thu Nguyen; OCA

MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS

AAPI Data
Act to Change
Asian & Pacific Islander American Vote
Asian American Psychological Association
Asian American Scholar Forum
Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC
Asian Pacific Americans in Higher Education
Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance
Asian Pacific Americans Public Affairs Association
Asian Pacific Institute for Gender Based Violence
Asian Pacific Partners for Empowerment Advocacy & Leadership
Asian & Pacific Islander Americans in Historic Preservation
Asian Real Estate Association of America
Association of Asian Pacific Community Health Organizations
Boat People SOS
Center for Asian American Media
Center for Asian Pacific American Women
Council for Native Hawaiian Advancement
Council of Korean Americans
Empowering Pacific Islander Communities
Filipino Young Leaders Program
Hindus for Human Rights
Hmong National Development Inc.
Japanese American Citizens League
Laotian American National Alliance
Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics
National Asian American Pacific Islander Mental Health Association
National Asian Pacific American Families Against Substance Abuse and Harm Reduction
National Asian Pacific Center on Aging
National Association of Asian American Professionals
National Coalition for Asian Pacific American Community Development
National Federation of Filipino American Associations
National Japanese American Memorial Foundation
National Korean American Service and Education Consortium
National Queer Asian Pacific Islander Alliance
OCA-Asian Pacific American Advocates
Papa Ola Lokahi
Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund
South Asian Public Health Association
Southeast Asia Resource Action Center
Stop AAPI Hate
The Asian/Pacific Islander American Chamber of Commerce & Entrepreneurship
The Sikh Coalition
United Territories of Pacific Islanders Alliance Washington

NCAPA is a project of Tides Center

January 29, 2025

Senator John Thune
Majority Leader
United States Senate
511 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Bill Cassidy
Chairman
U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
430 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Bernie Sanders
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
430 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Re: Concerns Surrounding Confirmation of Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. as the Incoming Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Dear Majority Leader Thune, Minority Leader Schumer, Chairman Cassidy and Ranking Member Sanders,

On behalf of the National Council of Asian Pacific Americans (NCAPA), a national coalition of 44 Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) organizations across the United States, we write to strongly urge you to carefully consider the nomination of Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. as the prospective incoming Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Our organizations and the AANHPI communities we represent are gravely concerned about Mr. Kennedy's capacity to serve. As a public figure, he has already demonstrated his ability to influence health-related affairs during the COVID-19 pandemic and advocated for interventions that studies have shown may do more harm than good. With healthcare spending ballooning every year and medical debt remains contributing to poverty for everyday Americans, Mr. Kennedy's leadership will impede most Americans, especially the most vulnerable, from living a healthy life. In a country as wealthy and experienced as ours, everyone should have access to resources that enable them to live longer, healthier, and higher quality lives. We have outlined our concerns below.

The harmful model minority stereotype that all individuals of Asian descent are affluent, well-educated, and well resourced, is far from the truth – especially because Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders face persistent health disparities. Such outcomes are largely due to unequal access to quality healthcare services, systemic and language barriers, and lack of insurance coverage. We are not a monolith, and healthcare providers and systems as a whole lack the comprehensive knowledge of our communities' unique needs. In fact, AANHPIs are comprised of over 50 ethnicities that speak more than 100 different languages and dialects.

Each of our communities has varying health related needs. For example, breast cancer rates in Asian American women increase almost sixfold after they immigrate to the U.S.[1] According to the National Library of Medicine, in 2021, the leading cause of death among Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders were COVID-19, health disease, cancer, unintentional injuries, and diabetes.[2] Asian Americans are 50% less likely, and Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders 70% less likely, than any other racial group to seek mental health support.[3] We need more resources and support to impactfully address ongoing health needs and improve health outcomes for our diverse communities.

That is why we believe the individual tasked with leading HHS should be one that seeks to serve communities and ensures the health and well-being of all, especially those who are underrepresented, under-resourced and face the greatest disparities. We all understand that supporting the health and wellness of millions of people of all backgrounds is a tremendous feat that is impacted by multiple, complex systems at play. We expect that the incoming Secretary of HHS will communicate with and work cooperatively with subject matter experts and community partners in order to support, fund and implement initiatives that positively impact health outcomes.

This person should possess the background, training, skills, management and general trust of the broader public. This would look like an in-depth understanding of how health issues impact different individuals and families, as well as knowledge of evidence-based and scientifically backed known interventions. As head of HHS, Mr. Kennedy would lead an agency with a $1.7 trillion budget and a workforce of over 80,000 and its efforts related to drugs, vaccines, food safety, medical research and safety net programs including Medicare and Medicaid. Given these responsibilities, Mr. Kennedy's track record is extremely alarming. He has expressed skepticism of lifesaving vaccines and has taken actions to spread false information, has proposed the development of programs targeting individuals suffering from substance misuse, supported Hydroxyquinone as a treatment for COVID, for which the FDA ended emergency use, and has been known to express anti-Asian conspiracy theories related to COVID-19. For these reasons and more, we urge the committee to carefully consider Mr. Kennedy's nomination.

As founder of Children's Health Defense, an anti-vaccine organization, Mr. Kennedy has utilized his platform to spread misinformation on the development of unvaccinated children compared to vaccinated children.[4] Through its work, Children's Health Defense has also filed nearly 30 federal and state lawsuits in an attempt to challenge vaccines and known public health mandates.[5] A sobering example of the deadly harms caused by Mr. Kennedy's actions to undermine the effect of vaccines includes the spread of vaccine misinformation in Samoa during a 2019 measles outbreak. Prior to the outbreak, Mr. Kennedy described the situation in Samoa as being mild.[6] Following Mr. Kennedy's visit to Samoa, during which he expressed distrust of vaccines, he publicly questioned the effectiveness of the vaccines that were distributed.[7] As a result of the outbreak and the impact of vaccine misinformation, more than 5,700 individuals were infected; this resulted in the deaths of 83 people – mostly young children.

In 2023, he further claimed that vaccines cause autism and cited Andrew Wakefield's 1998 study originally published in the Lancet.[8] It is worth noting that the Lancet retracted the article and acknowledged the harm this article had caused.[9] We cannot depend on Mr. Kennedy to lead HHS if we cannot depend on him to keep up to date with research while continuously spreading false information.

Mr. Kennedy's proposal of "wellness farms" is extremely troubling. He has expressed an interest in focusing on people suffering from substance misuse and substance use disorder (SUD), including people with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). This is dangerous rhetoric that many behavioral health professionals liken to the harm caused by conversion camps. While our understanding of ADHD, autism in communities of color and women, and how to improve our behavioral health resources to help Americans sustain healthy recovery patterns grows, his unfounded and alarming views pose great danger in advancing our understanding of these conditions. During a time where Americans are facing heightened mental health crises, increased suicide rates, and increased SUD, these views and the policies he intends to implement will undo the work that researchers and clinicians have poured into advancing this field and will cause indefinite harm to millions of Americans, veterans, and other groups.

Anti-Asian hate throughout and following the COVID-19 pandemic has continued to impact our communities. During the first two years of the pandemic, the national organization Stop AAPI Hate received more than 11,000 reports of anti-AA and NHPI hate.[10] In 2022, the Federal Bureau of Investigation witnessed a sharp increase in anti-Asian hate crimes throughout the pandemic. In 2023, Mr. Kennedy expressed antisemitic and anti-Asian conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 as part of a conversation on ethnic bioweapons.[11] During this time he stated that, "COVID-19 is ethnically targeted. COVID-19 attacks certain races disproportionately. The races that are most immune to COVID-19 because of the genetic structure/genetic differentials among different races of the receptors. COVID-19 is targeted to attack Caucasians and Black people. The people who are most immune are Ashkenazi Jews and Chinese. We don't know whether it was deliberately targeted or not but there are papers out there that show the racial or ethnic differential and impact."[12] During the COVID-19 pandemic, perpetrators of hate acts towards Asians and Asian Americans reflected the same inflammatory anti-China language used by policymakers.[13] We are deeply troubled by Mr. Kennedy's statements especially about our communities during a time when COVID-19 has taken the lives of millions and has furthered both bias and hate crimes against our communities.

We believe that the individual trusted to lead the Department of Health and Human Services should be a leader who ensures the safety, health, and protection of all communities. Given Mr. Kennedy's record and actions, we remain gravely concerned that his leadership at the department will bring about further harm and continue to jeopardize lives. We thank you for your consideration of our concerns.

Sincerely,

The National Council of Asian Pacific Americans (NCAPA)

Asian American Psychological Association

Asian Pacific Americans in Higher Education

Boat People S.O.S, Inc.

Empowering Pacific Islander Communities

NAAPIMHA

National Asian Pacific American Families Allied for Substance Awareness and Harm Reduction

National Federation of Filipino American Associations

National Queer Asian Pacific Islander Alliance

OCA - Asian Pacific American Advocates

Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund

South Asian Public Health Association (SAPHA)

Stop AAPI Hate

United Territories of Pacific Islanders Alliance (UTOPIA WA)

---

[1] *https://www.rogelcancercenter.org/living-with-cancer/survivorship/advocacy/asian-americans-and-cancer*
[2] *https://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/native-hawaiian-and-pacific-islander-health*
[3] *https://www.uclahealth.org/news/article/confronting-mental-health-barriers-asian-american-and-2* and *https://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/mental-and-behavioral-health-native-hawaiianspacific-islanders*
[4] *https://childrenshealthdefense.org/vaccine-secrets/video-chapters/some-studies-have-found-that-unvaccinated-kids-are-healthier-than-vaccinated-kids/*
[5] *https://www.npr.org/2024/12/03/nx-s1-5198506/rfk-jr-anti-vaccine-chd-lawsuits*
[6] *https://childrenshealthdefense.org/defender/lsamoa-medical-freedom-hero-court-case-dismissed/*
[7] *https://www.respectfulinsolence.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/RFKletterSamoanPM.pdf?fbclid=IwY2xjawGp_UNleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHX1wi4XacuhRIkMIPcM88Z6jfOQMLl9NHnVQH2-RHCpFUVrMTJairLIo-A_aem_qjxFcsThsCtStmFYR_JMWQ*
[8] *https://www.foxnews.com/video/6330950198112*
[9] *https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC2831678/*
[10] *https://stopaapihate.org/2022/03/04/statement-report-shows-almost-11000-hate-incidents-most-reported-by-women/#:~:text=Ahead%20of%20the%20first%20anniversary,acts%20alongside%20recommendations%20for%20policymakers*
[11] *https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/15/us/politics/rfk-jr-remarks-covid.html*
[12] *https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2023/jul/19/robert-f-kennedy-jr/covid-19-wasnt-targeted-to-spare-jewish-and-chines/*
[13] *https://stopaapihate.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Stop-AAPI-Hate-Scapegoating-Report.pdf*