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LDF Calls on Elected Officials to Condemn Discrimination Linked to COVID-19

On March 11, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a [global pandemic](#), further affirming that the virus will likely have a devastating impact on an increasing number of people around the globe for the foreseeable future. While the spread of the virus itself is gravely concerning, the rise in anti-Asian hate crimes and other discrimination stemming from COVID-19 is also extremely disturbing. Recent discriminatory actions, along with countless historical examples, illustrate how moments of fear can easily lead to unlawful and inhumane conduct if left unchecked. The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) calls on all U.S. elected officials to immediately issue affirmative statements condemning acts of hate and discrimination against Asian and Asian-American communities in the United States, and to commit city and state law enforcement resources to protecting against and prosecuting hate crimes.

The United States has a long history of discrimination, violence, and othering against Asians and Asian Americans. Among many examples, the [Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882](#) banned Chinese laborers from immigrating to America and prohibited Chinese individuals residing in the United States from obtaining citizenship. It was the first-ever American immigration law to exclude an entire ethnic group. Moreover, during World War II, the United States forced thousands of Japanese Americans to live in [internment camps](#) for years, engaging in deep violations of their civil and human rights due to completely unfounded and erroneous fears about national security. And, throughout American history, Asians have faced [contrasting and equally racist stereotypes](#) characterizing them as both model minorities (a stereotype that also perpetuates anti-Black sentiment) and perpetual foreigners who are a threat to white supremacy. These racist acts and harmful stereotypes have caused Asians to endure trauma and bias throughout this country's history.

“Asians in the United States are increasingly facing threats, violence, and rampant social and economic discrimination linked to the COVID-19 pandemic. In New York City alone, Asian individuals have been [aggressively confronted](#) while riding the subway and physically assaulted while out in public, prompting the [investigation](#) of the NYPD's Hate Crimes Task Force,” said Sherrilyn Ifill, LDF's President and Director-Counsel. “These racist actions further exacerbate the rampant discrimination and othering that Asians in the United States have faced throughout this country's history – and they must be stopped immediately. Amidst this global health crisis, it is imperative for elected officials to take a stand and condemn the fomenting of violence, divisiveness, and bias. Now more than ever, Americans must unify and support each other – and the onus is on lawmakers to lead this charge.”

Stigmatization and racism often go hand-in-hand with disease outbreaks around the world, as fear and uncertainty can prompt people to erroneously blame a particular group for an outbreak. The discrimination and violence [against Jews](#) during the Bubonic plague of the 1300s and [Asian Americans](#) during the early 1900s plague, against [Haitian Americans](#) during the spread of HIV in the 1980s, and against [Mexican Americans](#) during the 2009 swine flu outbreak, are just some of many examples that illustrate how public health crises can serve as catalysts for rampant discrimination – and why it is so essential to actively call out and condemn discriminatory behavior before it becomes even more problematic.

“In times of fear and crisis, it is far too common for societies to further entrench their existing xenophobic stereotypes about particular racial and ethnic groups – and engage in inhumane and discriminatory actions against them. The [United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) and [Asian-American lawmakers](#) have already called on governmental leadership to condemn discrimination against Asians and all people afflicted by COVID-19 – and to actively quell rumors and misinformation about the virus,” said Janai Nelson, LDF’s Associate Director-Counsel. “LDF echoes these calls for action, as we recognize the inherent threat to civil and human rights posed by pandemic-induced bias. It is our elected officials’ responsibility to take the lead in stopping this discrimination through rhetoric and action, as Americans will look to them for guidance in this challenging time.”

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Founded in 1940, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) is the nation’s first civil and human rights law organization. LDF has been completely separate from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) since 1957—although LDF was originally founded by the NAACP and shares its commitment to equal rights. LDF’s Thurgood Marshall Institute is a multi-disciplinary and collaborative hub within LDF that launches targeted campaigns and undertakes innovative research to shape the civil rights narrative. In media attributions, please refer to us as the NAACP Legal Defense Fund or LDF.

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