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Dear Elected Officials:

On behalf of the American Civil Liberties Union of Wisconsin, we write to express our grave concern over the increasing incidents of hate, discrimination, and violence against Asian Americans—a community of all immigration statuses. We urge your office to send a public message that attacks against Asian American communities, and the scapegoating of Chinese American community members in particular, is unacceptable and that Asians are an integral part of U.S. communities.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to take an increasing toll on our country, Asians in America have experienced alarming levels of harassment as well as physical attacks. In the timespan of two weeks, Asian Americans reported experiencing over 1,100 racist acts.¹ Reports of physical violence against Asians—and those perceived to be Asian—in the United States have exponentially increased. In California, a sixteen-year-old student was hospitalized after being physically assaulted at school over inaccurate racial stereotypes related to the coronavirus.² In Texas, three family members, including two children, were stabbed at a Sam's Club by a man who inaccurately associated them with the virus based upon their race.³ In Wisconsin, Milwaukee restaurant owners were forced to close their doors due to verbal attacks⁴ and the Marathon County Sheriff has reported there have been "intimidation confrontations, where individuals have made derogatory remarks, have stopped movement by blocking, or have gone so far as to even spit or cough on persons with the idea that the virus is being returned."⁵ These stories reflect an alarming trend that shows no signs of slowing.

This is not the first time that marginalized communities—including people of Asian descent—have faced increasing harassment and violence in the face of a national emergency. After a wave of immigration from China to California in the late 1800s, Asians in the United States were targeted using racist stereotypes that developed into policies and laws, such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which was not fully repealed until national quotas were eliminated in 1952.⁶

¹ Press Release, Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council and Chinese for Affirmative Action, *STOP AAPI HATE Receives over 1,100 Incident Reports of Verbal Harassments, Shunning and Physical Assault in Two Weeks* (April 3, 2020), http://www.asianpacificpolicyandplanningcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/Press_Release_4_3_20.pdf.

² *Teen Student in LA Assaulted as Coronavirus Fears Stoke 'Racial Backlash'*, CBS Los Angeles (Feb. 13, 2020), <https://losangeles.cbslocal.com/2020/02/13/teen-student-in-la-assaulted-as-coronavirus-fears-stoke-racial-backlash/>.

³ *FBI Calling Stabbing at Midland Sam's a Hate Crime*, CBS7 (March 30, 2020), <https://www.cbs7.com/content/news/FBI-calling-stabbing-at-Midland-Sams-a-hate-crime-569233691.html>.

⁴ *Milwaukee's Lucky Liu's closes after employees receive verbal attacks from customers* <https://www.tmj4.com/news/coronavirus/milwaukees-lucky-lius-closes-after-employees-receive-verbal-racist-attacks-from-customers>

⁵ *As Xenophobic Attacks Increase In Wisconsin, Officials And Advocates Respond*, WPR (March 26, 2020) <https://www.wpr.org/xenophobic-attacks-increase-wisconsin-officials-and-advocates-respond>

⁶ Matthew Lee, *Coronavirus Fears Show How 'Model Minority' Asian Americans Become the 'Yellow Peril'*, NBC (Mar. 9, 2020), <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/coronavirus-fears-show-how-model-minority-asian-americans-become-yellow-ncna1151671>.

During World War II, the U.S. government actively fabricated smears against Japanese people in the United States, including in filings before the Supreme Court, resulting in the mass incarceration of people of Japanese descent, including U.S. citizens, in internment camps. Just days after September 11, Muslim, Arab, Iranian, Middle Eastern, and South Asian communities faced a spike of hate crimes, including some homicides;⁷ the numbers have never actually subsided and discriminatory policies followed. With the rise of COVID-19, fear is once again driving racism and creating an environment rampant with acts of hate and violence in which many Asians in America are afraid to go out to seek basic necessities.

COVID-19 is devastating communities all over the United States. Fear and anxiety are a constant, which is why it is so important that people don't have to fear being targets of racist attacks on top of the pandemic. These could further contribute to the already disparate effects COVID-19 is having on communities of color in America. It is the duty of public officials to uphold the civil and constitutional rights of all individuals regardless of race, ethnicity, nationality, disability, income, or any other protected characteristic. As in past moments of national crisis, the leadership of our elected officials will shape not only the impact of the moment itself, but also the ongoing impacts of racism in our communities. The silence of our elected officials, or worse, their tacit support of those engaged in harassment and violence, contributes to this environment and emboldens these attacks. No one should be afraid to seek out their basic necessities or medical care, let alone be harassed or attacked.

We urge you, as elected officials and representatives of *all* of your constituents, including Asian Americans, to issue statements declaring that hate, racism, harassment, and discrimination are unacceptable and send the message that you will not tolerate the singling out of anyone based on ethnicity and scapegoating. In these times, your leadership is crucial to the treatment of your community members and their safety and security. Those engaged in such racist, hateful behavior must know that their actions will not be tolerated, and those impacted must know that as individuals, families, and communities, they will be supported and protected.

In order to prevent the mistakes of the past, we urge your office to use the tools at its disposal to denounce the spread of xenophobia and racism and the misinformation driving them.

Thank you for your consideration,

Molly Collins
Advocacy Director
ACLU of Wisconsin

⁷ See e.g., Rana Sodhi & Harjit Sodhi, *Remembering Balbir Singh Sodhi, Sikh Man Killed in Post-9/11 Hate Crime*, Story Corps (Sept. 14, 2018), <https://storycorps.org/stories/remembering-balbir-singh-sodhi-sikh-man-killed-in-post-911-hate-crime/>.