

## Making a Way Out of No Way: Addressing Needs of NHPIs

Session Description: Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI) communities in California have been disproportionately impacted by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This session highlights the ways the State of California might work to mitigate the short- and long-term effects of the pandemic for NHPIs and all members of the state's diverse population. Speakers will discuss what funding equity looks like in order to sustain NHPI community-based organizations throughout the state and the importance of ensuring accessible, free, and reliable translation of materials into NHPI languages for community members interfacing with state government and governmental affiliated agencies.

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[Background]

Estella Owoimaha-Church was born into a first generation family, living on Tongva land. With her maternal grandparents coming from Hawaii and her paternal grandparents coming from Nigeria, she grew up in South Central Los Angeles. Currently, her work as the executive director of Empowering Pacific Islander Communities (EPIC) has led her to advocate for NHPI communities across the nation. She was also the first Samoan finalist for the Global Teacher Prize in 2018.

Kelani Silk is the Co-Founder and Executive Director of Marshallese Youth of Orange County (MYOC), Co-Founder and Co-Chair of National Marshallese Communities Coalition (NMCC), and is on the Board of Directors of Pacific Islanders. She has worked with community based organizations (CBOs) for over twenty years on topics within health advocacy, data collection, and education.

Reverend Pausa Kaio Thompson is a Ph.D. candidate in comparative theology and philosophy at Claremont School of Theology and is the Senior Pastor of the Dominguez Samoan Congregational Christian Church in Compton.

Dr. Kawika Liu has his MD, PhD, and JD degrees. He is an addiction medicine specialist and was previously a medical doctor in a rural and tribal health center. He received his MD from St. George School of Medicine and has an interest in population health, indigenous housing, public health, asthma, and cancer.

[Introduction]

*Reverend Pausa Kaio Thompson:*

I want to recognize the people who put our current data on NHPI together and speak for those at my church as I am a pastor. I am a voice to all of them. I also want to recognize the title, "Making a Way Out of No Way." In Black Theology, introduced by James Cone, is a form of liberation theology. It is very male centric. Black women came to my master degree program and pushed back against the patriarchy against Black Theology. They asked, "Where are the voices of Black women that are supposed to represent everyone?". This title comes from a place where there was no place in the beginning, where folks were invisible.

The continued use of AANHPI largely renders NHPI health conditions negligible. Where we continue using AANHPI is where we get lost. Governmental agencies are unaware of the political and cultural context of who we are, what the islands are, what we consist of. There is a large group of PIs that are not recognized. Directing resources have been ineffective because of this large dispersal of PIs. We recommend California provide funding to CBOs to invest in NH and PI communities.

This was highlighted during the pandemic especially. The underlying health disparities surfaced, especially when it came to health care. As a pastor, I think about the elderly, those who are living in motile households. We need to review the data and feedback. We need to be in control of our own narrative and have access to the data available to look back at the issues at hand. This event is a work in progress, and we can use this space to point out and discuss other issues within the NHPI community.

*Kelani Silk:*

I want to say a land acknowledgement to the lands we are currently on, the lands of the Tongva people. I want to speak about language justice during this briefing. NHPI communities have an accrued mortality rate of 123 deaths per capita, which is higher than California's death per capita rate at 84 deaths per capita. This was during the pandemic that we were able to collect this data. In order to combat these rising rates, I want to propose California provide verbal and written translation services for Marshallese, Tongan, Pigeon, Samoan, Chamorro and Hawaiian languages. The same needs to be done for governmental documents and materials.

Currently, 40% of NHPIs nation-wide speak other languages other than English. Of that 40%, 40% living in the Micronesian islands have limited English language proficiency. Next, the Tongans at 20%, other Melanesians at 21%, Samoan 16%, Chamorro at 8%, and other Polynesians at 12%. California lacks access for the translations as there is limited funding towards translation or interpretation. By offering these resources, we can decrease the overall vulnerability to the state of California.

Now, what are our recommendations? The state can provide immediate resources for in person and online translations for NHPI. They need to sustain such agencies that provide these services. There is no point in having them if they are only around for a single year. Moreover, include links on all government websites that link to organizations that provide these services. When looking at minority communities, our languages are not provided at the local or state level. California needs to accept and utilize NHPI dialects properly as there are many differences in dialects that fail translations to English. Lastly, there is a need to disclose and make public the contact information for those who are providing these translation services.

*Dr. Kawika Liu:*

I want to also thank all the people who did the work before us. We are the voices of our ancestors and of the people whose land we are on. We need to talk about colonialism. That is the missing piece that unites all these things. We need to talk about imperialism, the fact that Hawaii is occupied. There was no consent from the *Kanaka Maoli* in the events of 1959. As again in Samoa, again throughout the Pacific. Why was that? For the strategic interests of the United States. In Samoa for coal mining, in Hawaii because the United States is unwilling to give up their military bases. So when talking about inequities, that is the inequitable impact of the pandemic on NHPI communities and that is a direct result of colonialism. This is the erasure of NHPIs from the United States dialogue. Like how the native people have been erased, so has NHPI.

We need to look at the social determinants and history of the issue. There is a discrepancy with NHPI in the use of AANHPI. When you hide the nuances, everyone looks healthy, everyone looks wealthy, everyone looks educated, but that is simply not the case. We need to focus on the individual groups, not just at the AANHPI group as a whole. This is personal, this is personal. This is our *aina*. When people talk about the reparations, this is not the past. This is the present. We need to honor our *kapuna*. The people that we are losing every day, we need to remember. The same things are happening because we are invisible. *Mahalo*.

*Estella Owoimaha-Church:*

I am the Executive Director for Empowering Pacific Islander Communities (EPIC). This issue is not just about the present. It's our future. I am looking at several of our younger community leaders that are taking charge up and down our coasts. They are picking up this baton and are running with it. I see my role as a bridge between our ancestors and all those who are coming up right behind me. I have an 8-year-old who needs a planet to live on. These disparities and inequities, we have been struggling already prior to the pandemic. We have been talking about these issues in our community. We have been talking about data desegregation for decades now. EPIC, shortly, will share guidance on how to provide feedback and make sure that we are heard. This is so federal agencies will take seriously into account what we are asking to be counted. Simply put, anything for us without us just aren't for us.

Our voices must be heard, and loudly, as loudly as we can. Hopefully, they get it right and we aren't fighting the battle of data desegregation for the next two decades because there are so many different issues that we need to combat. My biggest recommendation is that folks need to be in community with us. Also, the narrative around us needing to have a seat at the table is getting old. Actually, let's replace the table with something round for a space for us to talk about our topics, right next to the pile of cash that we need to make all of this happen.

Part of the issue about assuming where you know where we are is that you don't. We live in a diaspora, many of us disconnected with our homelands. We are moving around trying to survive. Many of us are not living in our homelands. We cannot take care of our kids, have food, get adequate healthcare, pay rent, or get our kids to college. It's hard out here, living in the Bay or down here in Southern California where our elders settled when they came here. So, to decide what to do with us based on outdated desegregation data and data that was probably captured incorrectly to begin with, I need to question the validity of the tools used to obtain this data.

What we are doing now is just compounding inequities that already exist and making things harder. How about we choose to fund equitably from the start and give funding to NHPI communities on the ground directly? Cut out the middleman. If you really want to make waves and support the NHPI community, write the check and let us do the work because we already know what our community needs. With regard to the data, we need to keep NHPI experts in the loop and in those spaces. We need to create clear pathways into industry sectors for science, health professions, educators in classrooms, artists and in media where we can continue to tell our stories and amplify our narratives. This is so we don't have to keep having panels where we re-explain everything that we've already talked

about, but years later. Let's not keep doing the same thing over and over again. Come straight to us, stop going around us, that will definitely lead to a solution quicker.

[Questions & Responses]

Q: How do you think education at secondary levels affects the issues, and how can we change that?

R: education at the secondary level is very important. Especially as a pastor. NHPI young folks to be more interested in the issue. The kids aren't patient; the parents aren't patient. The bills gotta be paid. Education takes too long. Folks need to eat in this house. These are the options out there for young folks out there. To address this, we need funding. Is the funding getting to them? Let me say to the AAPI. that the term is monetized. It is a monetized acronym. If that money is not gotten to the PI part of it, we are not describing that group well. Terms are not static, they are fluid. Each passing generation defines themselves when we talk about PI folks. Even NHPI is an issue. Focusing on one group over another. We are not given the PI kids a choice. That money is not going into the right families and home. The resources are not there. There is no clear and concise way to get them. We need to go through an AANHPI org to get money for an NHPI. being tokenized in certain spaces. For me, being a community leader, need to place myself in the AAPI spaces to voice the concerns of my people

E: as a longtime classroom teacher, I intentionally chose to teach in south LA. where I thought I would have a classroom full of black and PI kids. Not a single PI kid on campus. I grew up here where they go. My peoples were gone. It became clear because our needs were not being met, not anywhere in the K-12 levels. There are no teachers that look like them. No culturally responsive plans. Many PI kids need outlets. Even in undergraduate programs, we are doing disservice to NHPI folks due to leaving out oceanic and PI studies. Ethnic Studies is a 50-year tradition that has a very clear tradition, to limit it to just Asian studies is a disservice. We gotta meet kids where they are, to provide educators and kids, to meet their needs who best reflect who they are and most importantly, who they want to be. The identity crisis is even harder when you are living away from homelands. I had to fight for my Samoan culture and I didn't get it until undergraduate. That was too damn late. We need to start at day one.

Dr.: when we talk about white nationalism and white supremacy, we are not just talking about white people. Internalized racism because I have what I have got but when I open the door for a little bit, you're gonna take it. We cannot forget our cousins in the Pacific. Without some of this infrastructure, the few opportunities that exist at the post-secondary levels will cease to exist. Legal programs and governmental programs. We have to be aware of it and within the American system, need to look for ways to preserve opportunities. Preserve real capita. If you don't have money, you don't have more opportunities because education takes too long and you have to go to work

K: looking at the truancy rates, we are less than 1% going onto higher education. Needs to look at the LA PI rate alone. Needs to be a tag in with a cognizance of the culture. Mom and dad have to go to work so grandma and grandpa have to watch the kids and there are language barriers there. Selflessness needs to be a part of our culture.

R: breaking down the existing walls because oppression keeps you so occupied. Even my brothers and sisters in the Asian communities, there are walls being built into the Pacific Islander community and the AA community. There a lot of deconstruction to and a lot of wealth today. By raising the issues, we have raised today, we are trying to draw attention of the folks of legislation and who handle funding. We don't want to be a footnote in any academic study, but at the forefront. We need to control our own narrative by working together in specific communities, that is the ultimate goal for this summit.,

Q: What does “coming straight to us, not around us” look like when referring to funding?

E: budgets prove priority. Not lumping us in with AAPI. i say we point out to org and tell them they don't have any budget line. There should be one for the work we need funding for. Hold them accountable. Us showing up at important budget meetings at local and state level. The larger orgs do everything they can for the smaller orgs. They not trying to send us the money, they are trying to make it the hardest most complex way possible. The larger organizations can do the application process and then give the money to the smaller orgs.

K: the fact that we are invisible, the lack of investment, and those who cannot do the funds (the grassroots organizations). A lot of them do not know how to create a proposal, to handle infrastructure. These smaller orgs have funding as the last things on their mind when they have food on their minds, how to take care of their peoples.

R: change the narrative on churches using money. I have a social-justice arm of my church, most of them denied my request for money. I want to reclaim the narrative that church is for the community and for the people. I don't have a grant writer, its rinky-dink but it's my story. You fall into a trap of asking for money but you have to ask for it in a certain way. Change the way people donate and change the narrative. I'm just gonna be in the struggle.

Q: Do you have an actual plan to activate and invigorate the youth of this community?

E: EPIC definitely has a plan. There is a lot we have to let go of: telling young people to be quite. We gonna let that live in the past. As a teacher, my MO is to keep out the way. Magic happens when you let the youngins do their thing. My generation has to do better to make room for the new younger generation.

[End]