



**TGNC HARM REDUCTION
BADDIES CAMPAIGN:
AAPI HARM REDUCTION
RESOURCE LIBRARY:
RESOURCE SHARING
FOR ASIAN AMERICAN
AND PACIFIC ISLANDER
COMMUNITIES**

Written by: [Taylor Edelmann](#) | Published: September 30, 2022

Intro by:

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Written by:

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Most folks already have a hard time talking about harm reduction—at least in my opinion. So how do you talk about it if the

language for it hardly exists? This concept is at the core of our spotlight with Sam Wu.

Sam is quite possibly one of the most thoughtful and conscientious folks I've met in a long time. The care and intentionality they bring to their work are more than apparent in everything they do. Not only is Sam acutely aware of the lack of AAPI representation in harm reduction, but they offer up their experience as a queer person from a Vietnamese immigrant family to, in their words, "open up conversations to new voices, new perspectives, and imaginings of what community care—of what health & social justice can look like." Speaking with Sam brought me a lot of hope for the movement, and I hope you pick up on that, too.

In addition to this blog post, we invite you to check out Sam's [recorded interview](#) as well as this [Instagram post](#) about them and their work.

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Approximately 9.7% (1.5 million) of Asian, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders in the US struggle with substance use disorder (SUD) (2020 National Survey on Drug Use and Health). Over the past decade, there have also been sharp increases in accidental fatal opioid-related overdoses, as well as in opioid and stimulant-involved

overdoses among Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities in the US.

In particular, overamping and overdose-related fatalities have increased faster among AAPIs along the West and Northeast coasts than they have among white communities in those same regions (Townsend, et al. 2022). It's important to note that these numbers do not distinguish amongst the diverse number of communities that "AAPI" encompasses, and that the numbers alone do not capture the experience of each community. Each community, depending on many factors, including what region of the US they may be in, will have unique experiences, needs, and barriers to care.

Though this hasn't always been the case, these factors should be considered when designing harm reduction programs and spaces. As Sessi Kuwabara Blanchard illustrates in an [article](#) published in August 2019, harm reduction spaces often lack Asian American and Pacific Islander representation and consideration when it comes to program design. Even when programs are intended to primarily serve AAPI communities, there can be lower levels of engagement with services. The article goes on to highlight the role that deep-rooted stigma and shame – both internal and external – around drug use in AAPI communities can play in acting as barriers to accessing services. Reading this article, I began to reflect on my own

experience, question where this stigma and shame might be coming from, and think about ways to address it.

Where I grew up on occupied Seminole Land (in Florida), my older brother and I were the first generation of my family to fully grow up in America. At the time, we were also the only two Asian students in our entire elementary school. We later moved to occupied Lenapehoking land (in New Jersey), where there was a much larger Asian population. There still weren't many Viet families in the area though –let alone other queer, non-binary Viet people that I could connect with.

At home with my own immigrant Vietnamese family –one of only a few Viet families wherever we lived –I learned quickly that we often had to look inwards and rely on our family and each other for support. However, that didn't mean that we talked about a lot of things openly –especially things considered to be socially stigmatizing.

We didn't talk about emotions, trauma or mental health. We didn't talk about how the war impacted our elders or future generations of our family. As a Catholic family, we especially didn't talk about queerness, drug use, or sex. Even now, on the rare occasion that these topics come up in conversation, it's usually not specifically about any family members or ourselves and often comes with judgment, shame, and stigma from elders –who I was taught must always be treated with respect and rarely disagreed with.

On top of that, my family was “othered” and simultaneously subject to a “model minority” myth – a myth that has not only painted AAPI communities as a monolith, but has also had far-reaching effects that influence our ideas of what our own experiences and challenges are as AAPIs in America. Essentially: we don’t talk about these things in our family, and these “issues” don’t exist in our communities.

I had difficulty connecting with my elders on a deep level because I felt I couldn’t show up as my authentic self. Even if I felt ready to engage in open and honest conversations with my elders, I didn’t have the language to. I didn’t and still don’t have the words in Vietnamese to talk about parts of who I am and the things that are important to me – such as, gender identity, queerness, sexuality, and harm reduction.

On the other hand, I also don’t know the words to ask about or understand the experiences that older generations of my family lived through. Only recently have I really heard in-depth stories from my mother—who speaks fluent English—about her forced displacement and migration to the US, and her experience of adjusting to life in a place where our family was the only Vietnamese community she had.

Now living on occupied Piscataway Land (Baltimore, MD) I’m grateful to have found queer community in Baltimore, and to have the chance to organize with and learn from other queer activists, especially as

part of Queer Skate Baltimore, and other harm reduction advocates. It's been incredibly validating to have found safe spaces to be and talk about my authentic self, and to feel a sense of belonging in another family that cares for, loves, and supports each other. Organizing mutual aid efforts, protests, building community spaces, hosting queer events, celebrating and sharing in queer joy, rage, and sadness, and giving space to the voices that need to be heard. This is a community that often shows up for and listens to each other with creativity, mutual understanding, empathy and radical love – an environment that creates space for open, honest dialogue and communal & self-healing.

What I've learned from my experiences with my family, my harm reduction work, and organizing is that connection and showing up with a desire for a deep understanding of each other's experiences across generations, identities, and experiences is the basis of how we start to have open and honest conversations and begin to heal together as a community. My hope is that we can continue to grow and cultivate spaces where those types of connections can be built across AAPI communities and generations, alongside and in solidarity with Black, Indigenous, and other POC communities, and that together we can find ways to address the deep-seated stigma and misunderstanding around drug use, sex work, mental health, and gender and sexual identity.

In writing this and creating a resource library, I'm hopeful that it will
1) highlight the harm reduction movements already happening across the US in Asian American and Pacific Islander communities and 2) create a space for AAPI communities to share collectively in dialogue, knowledge, resources, and dreams for the future.

Sources:

2020 National Survey on Drug Use and Health. SAMHSA. Townsend, T., Kline, D., Rivera-Aguirre, A., et al. (2022). Racial/ethnic and geographic trends in combined stimulant/opioid overdoses, 2007-2019. American Journal of Epidemiology, Volume 191, Issue 4. April 2022. Pages 599-612.

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If you would like to get in contact with Sam, please email them here.

Here is a list of the resources recommended by Sam. Check them out and share them with your contacts!

AAPI Harm Reduction Resource Library:

Description: A community-driven, living collection of harm reduction and mutual aid resources primarily serving and/or accessible to Asian American and Pacific Islander communities across the US. **Please share as much information as you can about ongoing mutual aid efforts, harm reduction organizations,**

healing circles, community spaces, events, opportunities for intergenerational and community dialogue, etc., that you are aware of. Feel free to share widely!

Add to the AAPI Harm Reduction Resource Library Here!

Link to the Resource Library