



SCALING UP COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

CASE STUDY

Asian Pacific Environmental Network

APEN
ASIAN PACIFIC
ENVIRONMENTAL
NETWORK

အာရှ-ပစိဖိတ်
ပတ်ဝန်းကျင်
အသင်း



Asian Pacific Environmental Network

CASE STUDY

Based in Oakland and Richmond, California, the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) is an immigrant-led organization that has been building power and leadership among Asian immigrants and refugees since 1993. To APEN and its 800 members, climate change is not only an environmental problem—it's a social, political and economic problem rooted in an extractive economy that has concentrated poverty and pollution in working class communities of color. And it creates an opportunity for APEN to work closely with other People of Color-led organizations to redefine and reimagine environmental justice.

"We see our freedom and our liberation as tied to each other," asserts Mây Nguyễn, APEN's Development Director, whose parents escaped Viet Nam on a fishing boat at the end of the war, due to political and religious persecution. By working in solidarity with allies, APEN builds power to affect systemic change; innovates creative, large-scale, community-led responses to environmental degradation and the climate crisis; and advocates and organizes to create regenerative economies and thriving communities for all.



ASIAN PACIFIC ENVIRONMENTAL NETWORK

Innovating a Community- Driven Model



**“We see our freedom
and our liberation as
tied to each other.”**

Mây Nguyễn
Development Director, APEN

Grounded in this vision, APEN has been working in coalition to resource and scale “community resilience hubs,” a concept that emerged over the last several years, rooted in decades of organizing around a just transition. These hubs are trusted community entities—such as youth centers, schools, libraries, and places of worship—that residents turn to for support and assistance during natural disasters (in the Bay Area, these include wildfire smoke, heat waves, and power outages). These institutions are already part of a community’s social fabric, and the idea is to invest in them rather than create new infrastructure. “We are seeking to bolster the resources [these groups] have to deliver the services and programming that they’re already offering—and have them apply a climate lens to ensure clean energy, backup power, and proper air filtration,” says Amee Raval, APEN’s Policy and Research Director.

The hub concept also builds on the lessons APEN learned in responding to the 1999 Richmond Chevron refinery fire and its far-reaching impact on Laotian refugees living in adjacent neighborhoods, namely that immigrant and refugee communities need in-language outreach and messengers anchored in their communities to bring

that information to them. The concept also builds on more recent lessons from serving multi-generational immigrant and refugee families during the COVID-19 pandemic, including creating spaces that support the distinct needs of elders and of young people who are part of the workforce.



The local community, including APEN's linguistically isolated refugee and immigrant members, contributed to the design of the Community Resilience Hubs, with leadership from a peer-selected steering committee of a dozen residents. The concept draws upon the refugee and immigrant experience of displacement and their deep desire for belonging and to be rooted in a place. Community resilience hubs allow residents to find safety in the institutions they already know and trust. The hubs are also models for local ownership and governance, giving area residents agency and decision-making over the design, priorities, and resources of the resilience hubs to address climate-related emergencies impacting their families and communities.

We are seeking to bolster the resources [these groups] have to deliver the services and programming that they're already offering—and have them apply a climate lens to ensure clean energy, backup power, and proper air filtration."

Amea Raval
Policy and Research Director, APEN



In 2021, the State of California had an unprecedented budget surplus, and APEN and their allies saw an opportunity to push for scaling the community resilience hubs. Because the concepts of climate resilience and resilience hubs were new to most legislators, educating them was essential. APEN produced two critical reports, [“Mapping Resilience”](#) and [“Resilience Before Disaster,”](#) to illuminate the disproportionate impact on low-income communities of color and make the case for investing in community-based resilience. For many people, “climate resilience is about natural resources protection like wetland restoration, forest management, or huge infrastructure projects,” says Raval. “However, we need to build resources for climate resilience at the neighborhood level and there are ways to do that through policy.”

In addition to APEN, the coalition that worked on this policy campaign included grassroots leadership from the Leadership Counsel for Accountability & Justice and the California Environmental Justice Alliance, with support from the Greenlining Institute. Young people from Richmond and elders from Oakland Chinatown alike joined other environmental justice advocates and allies for two virtual lobby days with over a dozen key legislators.

They spoke to the value of the hubs in their own communities, why more hubs are needed across the state, and the difference that state funding would make. “Resilience is not some innate characteristic of human beings; it’s a social system, and we need to support it and invest in these systems,” asserts Nguyễn. “That’s why being able to translate resilience into critical infrastructure and social structures is so important.”

Together, APEN and their allies won \$100 million (2022-2024) to create a new grant program for community resilience hubs, which would support trusted community institutions across the state to deliver integrated emergency response services. The hub concept and the advocacy campaign to secure unprecedented state funding demonstrate that directly impacted communities have a vital role to play in designing and advancing innovative solutions that not only address their needs but benefit all communities.

With the legislation signed into law, APEN is co-leading an effort to ensure that grassroots voices inform implementation by state agencies and that spending is consistent with the intent of the legislation. APEN’s work on climate resilience extends beyond scaling the



funding for the hubs. Locally, they are partnering with RYSE center to model renewable energy and energy cost savings through youth leadership. Regionally and at the state level, they are advising government agencies on how to embed equity in climate change adaptation efforts—and ensuring that community voices inform emergency protocols and utility planning. In addition, as convener of California’s Green New Deal Network, they are well positioned to mobilize national advocacy to secure federal funding for the hubs model.

Recognizing that building Asian American electoral power can help advance their policy agenda, APEN runs one of the largest multilingual Asian American voter mobilization programs in the country. They engage immigrant and refugee voters in-language to advance a shared vision for racial justice, economic equity, and climate solutions.



ASIAN PACIFIC ENVIRONMENTAL NETWORK

A Win Built on Decades of Grassroots Power and Solidarity Building



“It was beautiful to see not just Asian community groups, but also Black-led groups come together, to hold that grief with us, to be in solidarity, and to unite our collective voice and power...”

Amee Raval

Policy and Research Director, APEN

APEN's legislative win to scale up community resilience hubs across California was built on years of persistent organizing, advocacy, and research; a deep commitment to movement building, allyship, and partnership; and overall grounding as a grassroots justice organization. APEN also attributes much of their success to the relationships that they have built over many years with California legislators, other policymakers, and coalition partners. In particular, they have been able to establish and leverage relationships with state legislators who are first- and second-generation immigrants or who recognize the importance of the immigrant experience in their district's culture and economy.



The success of the resilience hub campaign built upon previous advocacy wins, including a 2019 state law requiring a culturally competent response to emergencies. Thanks to the work of APEN and their allies, this law goes beyond different languages spoken to include race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual and gender minorities, people with disabilities, occupation and income level, and education level.

Grassroots leadership development has also been core to APEN's success. Their academy trains Asian immigrants and refugees to become powerful advocates for themselves and their communities. Through the trainings, APEN members learn concrete skills, including designing, planning, and implementing campaigns for policy change, voter engagement, and public education. They also learn about APEN's [Just Transition](#) framework and vision for moving our society



from an extractive economy to a regenerative one, where everyone has the resources they need to live full and dignified lives.

APEN has long worked in alliance with Black communities and other people of color to advocate for broader issues including sustainable housing, mental health services, and community-based safety approaches in lieu of police surveillance. And those communities have in turn stood with Asian Americans, most recently with the spike in anti-Asian hate crimes, including the March 2021 mass shooting in Atlanta that killed eight people, including six Asian American women. As Amee Raval shares, "It was beautiful to see not just Asian community groups, but also Black-led groups come together, to hold that grief with us, to be in solidarity, and to unite our collective voice and power."



ASIAN PACIFIC ENVIRONMENTAL NETWORK

How California's Asian Americans Are Experiencing Climate Change—and Leading Solutions



“Immigrant and refugee communities, especially those who are monolingual, are often shut out of a lot of status-quo approaches to emergency response and public and government services.”

Amea Raval
Policy and Research Director, APEN

APEN is seeking to build greater public awareness about the ways that Asian Americans, particularly those in poor and working-class communities, are impacted by climate injustice and environmental racism.

Some of the Southeast Asian refugees with whom they work experienced the use of Agent Orange and other chemicals during wartime in the 1960s and 1970s. “This memory of how our homelands were affected both physically and culturally by environmental violence and war allows us to really address the root causes of injustice,” Alvina Wong, Campaign and Organizing Director at APEN, shared with [Grist](#).

After fleeing bombings and chemical warfare in their homelands, these refugees resettled in Richmond, a city with over 350 toxic facilities and no culturally competent emergency response system in place.

During the massive fire at the Chevron refinery in 1999, safety alerts and instructions were not available in languages that non-English speakers could understand. “Immigrant and refugee communities, especially those who are monolingual, are often shut out of a lot of status-quo approaches to emergency response and public and government services,” says Ameer Ravel, Policy and Research Director at APEN. “They need in-language outreach and messengers anchored in the communities to bring that information to them.” The voices of Asian Americans—as those experiencing climate injustice and as those innovating solutions—have had to fight to be heard in the broader climate space. Yet [recent research](#) commissioned by the California League of Conservation Voters Education Fund finds that California’s Asian Americans care deeply about protecting our air, land, and water, and are even more inclined to call themselves “environmentalists” than other voters statewide. These voters also believe that government should take an active role, and they support regulations and laws to protect natural resources.

The potential for impact is enormous: As the fastest growing population in California and one with burgeoning electoral power, Asian Americans—if engaged and mobilized—are poised to become a major force to achieve community-driven and humanity-centered climate policies.





UNBOUND PHILANTHROPY
unboundphilanthropy.org



THE SOLUTIONS PROJECT
thesolutionsproject.org



APEN ASIAN PACIFIC
ENVIRONMENTAL
NETWORK

APEN
apen4ej.org

These case studies were written by Elyse Lightman Samuels, edited by Daranee Petsod, and designed by Beldon Wolson. Taryn Higashi, Gloria Walton, and Sarah Shanley Hope were editors and thought leaders.