

CBHA BIPOC Members Profile Project

Wendy Wang, MPP, Chief Public Policy and Advocacy Officer, Sycamores

1. What does the word “community” mean to you?

For me, community evokes and reminds me not only of my nuclear family, but my extended family including grandparents, friends who I’ve met in high school and college, and colleagues across my career. When I think of the word “community”, I’m reminded of my friends from my faith-based church group throughout different seasons of my life. Particularly, as it relates to BIPOC related issues, the AAPI communities, where there have been countless leaders who have fought for greater access to culturally responsive and linguistically appropriate care that benefits these communities.

2. Let us talk about your upbringing. Please describe your community in as much or as little detail you would like to.

I am an immigrant. I’m technically 1.5 generation. I immigrated with my parents when I was about 4.5 years old from Taiwan to the United States. I grew up in a three-generation household, so what I said about community is due to the influence of my grandparents in shaping who I am today. Many of the values that I learned from my grandparents and parents have carried over to now. Things like respect for others, and respect for elders, individual sacrifices for family, the greater good, and for the community are things that I’ve observed and thought about until today. As I’ve gotten older, and I hear stories about how my parents experienced racism, I now realize why they didn’t share these stories when I was growing up. I was not at an age, where I could process or think about it in a different lens. But now as an adult hearing about it, I was able to reflect on how my parents weren’t vocal about the racism and discrimination they experienced, but they just continued to keep moving forward. They endured. It’s that sense of being quiet and things will still be okay, which I think ties into the Model Minority myth for our communities in the broader AAPI landscape. I think that we’ve seen changes and things in 2020 and 2021 that challenge that. Being silent does not mean that the discrimination and prejudices are okay. Another thing that I’ve learned from my parents and my grandmother is the sense of inclusivity and hospitality. When I grew up, we were quite poor compared to where we are now, but my grandmother always opened our home to extended family who were visiting. She used cooking meals to welcome folks into the family and her friends. That has always stayed with me until today.

3. Can you please talk about you and your involvement in the communities you are a part of?

Across my career, I’ve had the opportunity to volunteer and serve on boards of different non-profits both in the city of Torrance and Pasadena. I think what has been particularly meaningful for me, was my involvement with different organizations at the University of Southern California.

4. What is your primary responsibility at your job?

My primary role is overseeing advocacy at the local, state, and federal level as it relates to issues in the operations of my organization, Sycamores, whether it's at the local level with departments like DCFS, DMH, and monitoring motions being considered at the LA County Board of Supervisors level. I translate this at the state and national level by working with CBHA and the California Alliance to follow budget issues, bills relating to community mental health, child welfare, juvenile justice, and youth homeless. My secondary role is co-facilitator of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Advisory Committee that we have for the organization.

5. Who has been the most influential person in your career?

I have two individuals who come to mind. The first is my college mentor, Dr. Davis Yoo. We first met when I was an undergraduate freshman at Claremont McKenna College. I was on a certain trajectory that had nothing to do with my career now. When I was a senior in college, I had wanted to get my Ph.D. in history with the intersection in Asian-American history. He was single-handedly responsible for sending me on a pathway to think about track in public policy. I didn't even know what public policy was, but Dr. Yoo said to me, "Well, you should think about it because I think you would be good at it and it would give you a broader range of career options. If you were to get your Masters in Public Policy, you can always go back and get your Ph.D. What I valued from this mentorship is his courage to introduce a career track that to a student who was focused and wasn't going to get distracted. My professor was able to see the quality skills of students and how that would enable them to transcend different sectors. I am grateful for him because without him, I would be on a totally different trajectory. I would probably be at a college and teaching Asian-American studies, which would have been great too! The second person is Dr. Susan Mandel. She is the former President and CEO of Pacific Clinics. I worked for Pacific Clinics for many years before I transitioned to Sycamores, and what I really appreciated and learned from Dr. Mandel is the importance of investing and advocating to increase culturally and linguistically appropriate care. And she taught me that sometimes it just takes courage. Dr. Mandel demonstrated this when she continued to believe in the vision of opening an outpatient center to reach AAPI communities in the San Gabriel Valley. Now, the Asian Pacific Family Center (of Pacific Clinics has gone on to serve so many hundreds of different clients across different Asian Pacific Islander languages. She was also the one person who would continually talk about the importance of addressing workforce issues, recruitment, retention strategy long before the current conversation on workforce, burnout, and self-care. So, because of these two things and during my time there, I really can't thank her enough. She was my direct supervisor, and I learned a lot from her. She is truly a visionary leader-- someone who able to cast the vision while still staying focused on the day-to-day operations of keeping clinics open.

6. What's an interesting fact about you and/or your organization most people don't know?

I'll start with me. When I was much younger, I marched with my high school marching band in two Rose Parades. That's my little weird factoid about myself. Related to my career, I worked as a staffer for a former city of LA mayor many years ago. In terms of my organization, I will say that I usually get a reaction when I describe the totality or continuum of care that we provide. Most people are familiar with our community mental health or child welfare programs, but they don't necessarily know that the full extent of our services also helps homeless young adults.

7. What motivates you in your field? What inspired you to get involved in this field initially?

If I had to be candid, I did not expect to be in the field this long. When I first started, my first job was working for a local trade association, the Association of Community Human Services Agencies (ACHSA), which is essentially CBHA for LA County providers. I think I was intrigued – I didn't know anything about community mental health at the time, but the reason that I'm still here and still doing the work is because I think about the mission of Sycamores – the missions of all these different CBOs – that are serving adults and children with severe mental illness. I think about how much help they need and how much help they're entitled to, and I would love to continue to see the stigma of mental health being dispelled. I think we've certainly seen a lot of that in the last two to five years as we've seen more conversations at the state about student mental health and suicide prevention. All of that is what keeps me going.

8. What was it like when you were just starting out in your field? What obstacles did you have to overcome to get to the position you have?

As someone who didn't know a lot about community mental health, I think one of the challenges was understanding what our very technical terms and long list of acronyms we have meant. A lot of these terms are seen as something that everybody knows, so that was a major learning curve entering the space. Also, understanding the funding streams. It's very complicated, there's different acronyms related to those funding streams, and it works differently in each county and at the state level. I think one challenge for me was not seeing leaders that looked like me across the different agencies. There were maybe two or three when I first started. I remember thinking about that and wondering why that was. It's really hard as a young person starting off to connect to those leaders and having enough courage to even broach the topic with them is part of the challenge. How do you connect and network with high powered leaders when you're younger in your career? There's no how-to handbook on how to engage with leaders and ask questions. Even today, when I think about it, there's no toolkit. Unless they ask us or there's a strategic choice to interact with them, there's no formal process for mentorship or networking opportunities for BIPOC leaders.

9. What has been your favorite or meaningful project so far in your career?

This a hard one to answer! I think as it pertains to my current job, one of the things I enjoy is facilitating the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Advisory Committee. Part of that is because it is made up of approximately 16 individuals across different roles and programs. I feel like just getting to talk about such a heavy issue with such a great mix of individuals who all have different perspectives is meaningful. We've talked about disproportionality in different systems, even processing some of the media and images from 2020 to 2021 has been really meaningful for me. I think, in the short time since we've launched that Advisory Committee, that project holds a special place in my heart. The other project has to do with legislation about allowing nurse practitioners to engage in their full scope authority. It's long been a controversial topic, and it has taken several attempts to finally get AB 890 (Wood) across the finish line. For me, it speaks to the workforce issue. We all know the data – there's a

national, state, and local shortage of qualified child psychiatrists and child psychiatrists who are bilingual. If I thought about it, I would have been a child psychiatrist! But I think that's the other project I would highlight as most meaningful.

10. What initially inspired you to join the CBHA BIPOC Affinity Group?

I was curious and excited because this was the first time where I see two state associations across state lines to form a group like this. I have seen other learning collaboratives or peer support models that are national, or local but the joint state associations was very intriguing to me.

11. Do you feel you have faced challenges as a BIPOC leader that others might not have?

This is a hard one to reflect on. I think for me some of the things that I had experienced and observed as a BIPOC leader are the intersection of the following three issues: gender, age, race/ethnicity. I look around, I don't see a lot of other folks in the space that look like me. I have been observing this since I entered the field, most of the leaders were male. I did not see strong API female leaders. Since then, as my career has evolved, I have come across several strong API female leaders, but you almost have to search for them. Some of them may not be in the community mental health space, maybe they are leading other social services organizations, but I have met them in the advocacy process.

12. Do you feel that BIPOC folks are adequately represented in executive/leadership positions in the behavioral health realm? If no, what do you feel needs to change?

For Sycamores, when we look at our leadership diversity, I think it is quite diverse. We continue to look at our leadership and find ways to improve on the demographics but as an organization, I think we are doing a strong showing. Across the field of community mental health, based on what I describe to be adequate and appropriate representation of BIPOC leaders, I think there is room for improvement. In terms of what I could recommend, I would go back to a formal program/mentorship where someone who wants to rise and be a BIPOC leader will get paired with a BIPOC leader. This side-by-side formality will help measure and mark the change we want to see.

13. What advice do you have to BIPOC individuals as they work towards becoming leaders in their own communities? Any lessons learned?

Going back to the example, a lot of times we are focused on the day to day and career professional development gets placed on the back burner. My advice would be don't let it be the back burner, because if the BIPOC individual is waiting for someone to reach out to them, they may be waiting for a long time. It requires a strategic choice and for someone to take the initiative to reach out to a BIPOC leader to meet them and learn from them. I have a colleague that is always reading or listening to a leadership book, he is investing in his own growth. Taking and carving out the time to always be a learner, whether it is on your own professional career or learning a particular skill set. Identifying a particular character trait that you want to develop as a leader, but you don't have and diving into that. It requires initiative and the investment of time, even personal time because we are all busy.