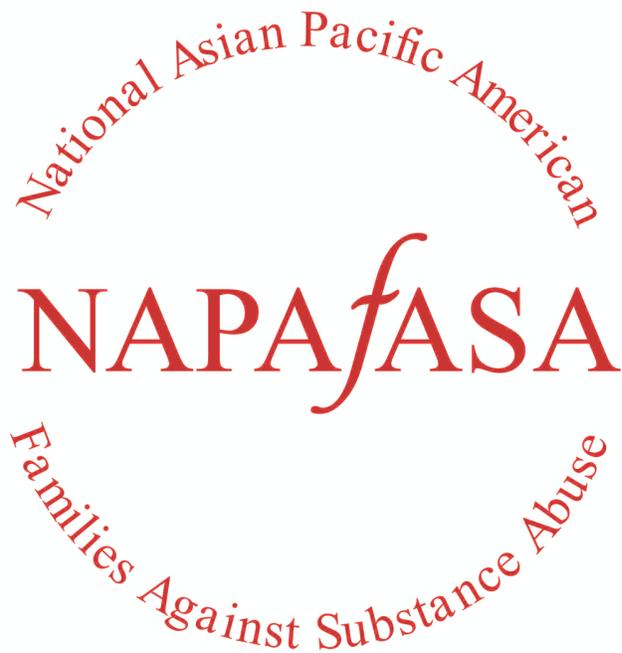


San Gabriel Valley MAT Project: Reducing Opioid Addiction in Asian American Communities December 2019 - August 2020

A Community Health Equity Plan

NATIONAL ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICAN FAMILIES AGAINST SUBSTANCE ABUSE (NAPAFASA)



National Asian Pacific American Families Against Substance Abuse
340 E. 2nd Street, Suite 409, Los Angeles, CA 90012
833-568-2639
info@napafasa.org

Made possible by funds received from the MAT Access Point funding of The Center at Sierra Health Foundation.

Suggested citation: NAPAFASA (2020). *San Gabriel Valley MAT Project: Reducing Opioid Addiction in Asian American Communities*

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	3
Executive Summary	4
Project Aim	4
Project Description	4
Data Collection	4
Highlight of Results	4
Conclusions & Recommendations	5
Acknowledgements	6
Section 1: Project Description	7
1.1 Background	7
1.2 Activities	7
<i>Data Collection Activities</i>	8
Coordination and Collaboration Activities	8
Community Education Activities	8
Section 2: Data Collection Methods	9
2.1 Data Collection Design	9
2.2 Data Collection & Analysis	9
SGV Outreach Events	9
Social Services Agency Partnerships	9
<i>Key Informant Interviews</i>	9
Section 3: Data Collection Results	10
<i>Key Informant Interviews</i>	10
Characteristics of SGV Asian Americans.....	10
Community Perceptions of Drug Use	10
Drug Use Norms	10
Suggestions for Community Health Approaches.....	11
Section 4: Conclusions and Recommendations	12
Building Trust and Rapport	12
Recommendation 1	13
Social Desirability Bias and Cultural Norms	13
Recommendation 2.....	13
Micro-geographies and Diversity	13
Recommendation 3	14
COVID-19, Global Pandemic, Lockdown, and Hate Incidents	14
Recommendation 4	15
Conclusion	15
References	16

Executive Summary

Project Aim

The primary aim of the San Gabriel Valley Medication Assisted Treatment Project was to develop a community planning process and community health document to assist with reducing opioid use disorder among the residents of the San Gabriel Valley.

Project Description

Between December 2019 and August 2020, NAPAFASA established partnerships with key social services agencies, and engaged community members in the San Gabriel Valley of Los Angeles County. The project's theory of change was based on the Community Organizing Theory with modifications for applicability in the Asian American community. By strategically collecting and disseminating public health information, NAPAFASA sought to bring this issue to the regional public's awareness.

SGV MAT activities focused on core strategies to achieve the project objective: 1) data collection activities, 2) coordination/collaboration activities (partnerships), and 3) community education activities. All evaluation activities were conducted in the San Gabriel Valley.

Data Collection

The data collection for this planning project involved mixed-methods use of qualitative and quantitative data. Given that the data collection sought to address community perceptions and understand environmental considerations, the evaluation design was pre-experimental with no control groups and no randomization of subjects. Data collection included: key informant interviews and coordination/collaboration (partnerships) with essential community-based organizations (and key staff within).

Highlight of Results

Partnerships and Stakeholders: Through the SGV MAT Project, NAPAFASA developed many additional partnerships with local key stakeholders. Nearly all the new partnerships involved prior relationships with stakeholders in the San Gabriel Valley who already worked with NAPAFASA in terms of gambling addiction, tobacco control and/or mental health issues. The time spent this past nine months was developing a dialogue concerning opioid use disorder and the more-apparent needs of Asian Americans in the San Gabriel Valley.

Intergenerational Families: During the course of the past nine months, the SGV MAT Project successfully increased the involvement of individuals and families of the San Gabriel Valley with regard to opioid addiction and related treatment services. Although some of the involvement came through outreach events, with COVID-19's mandatory lockdown, the project pivoted to the usage of online spaces. By continuing to partner with organizations that have pre-existing ties to SGV residents and businesses, the project was able to continue to meet with San Gabriel Valley community members.

Key Informant Interviews: Most key informants noted that opioid addiction did not seem a growing issue in the San Gabriel Valley. Tobacco use, vaping, cannabis, and alcohol continued to be raised as the most visible drugs of choice. The few anecdotes concerning opioids involved the sharing of prescription medication.

Informants noted that smoking is a prevalent norm among older immigrants, especially men. Many of them believed that many people in this community might have a protective factor against opioid addiction. This includes an awareness of the Boxer Rebellion and the harvesting of poppies, as well as the British usage of opiates and opium dens to create generations of opium addicts in China, given the large number of residents from Hong Kong, People's Republic of China, Singapore, and Taiwan (as well as ethnic Chinese immigrants via Vietnam and Korea).

While several key informants believed that opioid use disorder may be too narrow for most community members to care or feel urgent about (though most would be supportive), they suggested linking it to broader issues around mental health issues, and working with advocates in these areas. A few key informants suggested working with young people in the community because they would likely support such an issue (*e.g.*, less likely to be in favor of drug use among family members) and may look for community issues to hone their leadership skills.

COVID-19 and Safer at Home: Having worked just over one-third of the time allotted to this project (over three months), COVID-19 and the global pandemic impacted this planning project. SGV MAT Project had to pivot and focus on broader mental health and behavioral health issues that arose with the immediate lockdown of businesses and the Safer at Home directive. In addition, because in-person contact remains socially distanced with masks, the ability to connect with people remained highly limited, for the remainder of the project. Another unintended consequence of the global pandemic has been the significant rise in anti-Asian and anti-Chinese hate incidents, including in the San Gabriel Valley. These additional factors have impacted the final community health plan and next steps.

Conclusions & Recommendations

SGV MAT learned that many people care about reducing the negative health impacts of opioid use in Asian American communities, especially with regard to college-ready members of the Asian American communities. Our findings seem to suggest that Asian Americans are supportive of policies and practices that reduce opioid addiction, as well as increasing access to Medication Assisted Treatment. However, we also heard that this issue may be too narrow to inspire urgency in community members and elected policy makers. The project also uplifted many challenges related to conducting community health education in Asian American communities. These include strong levels of stigma and shame related to any addiction issues, let alone opioid use disorder. However, these are important considerations for future projects as any community health effort with Asian American communities will need to incorporate cultural values and norms.

Acknowledgements

This crucial work is only possible through so many leaders and partners. The NAPAFASA program staff include Myron Dean Quon and Michael Salazar. Community leadership include: Henry Lo, Lisa Thong, and Thomas Wong. Project volunteers include Stacy Vo.

Section 1: Project Description

1.1 Background

Data often show that drug use rates among Asian Americans are low compared to those in other ethnic communities. For example, according to the smoking prevalence data collected by the California Department of Public Health (2018), smoking rates for Asian men is only 14.7%.^[1] When this data is disaggregated, however, the same study found that 24.3% of Korean men and 27.8% of Vietnamese men smoked.

In recent years, NAPAFASA has been continuously alerted by community leaders, local agencies, and media to hidden drug use issues among college-age residents living in the San Gabriel Valley. Examples include the use of synthetic drugs by young Southeast Asian women leading to overdoses at outdoor EDM festivals. The SGV is densely populated by immigrants from China, South Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam. Although more and more Californians recognize the danger of opioid use disorder, the immigrant community is often left behind. Asian American communities are especially vulnerable in terms of smoking, drinking, other substance addictions, gambling addiction, and co-occurring disorders. This is due to lack of awareness and education, permissive attitudes toward alcohol and tobacco (AT) use, early AT use, peer and parental AT use, histories of trauma, immigration experience, acculturation stress, and language barriers. For example, the California Chinese American Tobacco Use Survey in 2004 found that a substantial segment of Chinese Californians do not realize how addictive tobacco can be; 38% believe tobacco is not as addictive as other drugs like heroin or cocaine.^[2] Through our tobacco, alcohol, and other substance use prevention work and problem gambling prevention work over the past 30 years, NAPAFASA is well aware that more services addressing these issues are needed and such services should be provided in a culturally competent and linguistically accessible manner.

1.2 Activities

Within the San Gabriel Valley, there is no known data available concerning opioid use disorder, let alone measurable awareness of access to Medication Assisted Treatment or NARCAN. By strategically collecting information and facilitating collaboration/coordination activities among San Gabriel Valley social services agencies, SGV MAT aimed to bring this issue to the public's awareness and develop a community health equity plan. Strategic use of information and education to a wide range of stakeholders and interested parties would further increase the level of awareness on this issue and the effectiveness of collaboration and partnership in advancing access to MAT and providing prevention resources. Our activities included broad participation in order to accelerate change concerning opioid addiction and related impacts.

SGV MAT activities focused on core strategies to achieve the project objective: 1) data collection activities, 2) coordination/collaboration activities (partnerships), and 3) community education activities. All such activities were conducted in the San Gabriel Valley.

Data Collection Activities

- Facilitated relevant OUD prevention meetings with 20 nonprofit organizations that work in the San Gabriel Valley (SGV).
- Collected anecdotal stories concerning SUD and OUD through 18 community outreach & engagement events in the San Gabriel Valley
- Collected information concerning awareness of SUD and OUD through online presentations targeting SGV residents and businesses.

Coordination and Collaboration Activities

- Collaborated with key groups including the YMCA – South Pasadena and San Marino and West San Gabriel Valley Boys and Girls Club.
- Coordinated OUD and SUD prevention strategies with Asian Pacific Family Center in Rosemead.
- Built relationships with two SUD prevention coalitions in the San Gabriel Valley (the A.I.R.E. Coalition and their supporting coalition for adult allies).

Community Education Activities

- Created a PowerPoint presentation concerning Asian Americans, mental health, COVID-19, and opioid use disorder. Provided information via online platforms to various residents of the San Gabriel Valley.

Section 2: Data Collection Methods

2.1 Data Collection Design

The data collection for this project involved mixed-methods use qualitative and quantitative data. Given that the data collection sought to assess community perceptions and understand environmental considerations, the data collection design was pre-experimental with no control groups and no randomization of subjects. Data collection included: intercept surveys (establishing partnerships), key informant interviews, and data collection during outreach events (prior to COVID-19 lockdown).

2.2 Data Collection & Analysis

SGV Outreach Events

SGV MAT conducted a total of 18 community outreach events. The purpose of these events was to assess the awareness of opioid use disorder, and the awareness of Medication Assisted Treatment. Data collection and information sharing at these events were conducted primarily in Rosemead, San Gabriel, Monterey Park, Pasadena, South Pasadena, and Alhambra.

Social Services Agency Partnerships

SGV MAT established numerous partnerships during the project year. 15 nonprofit stakeholders, 9 community members, and 8 additional key partners across private, public, and nonprofit sectors provided feedback and input into the community health equity plan to address opioid use disorder.

Key Informant Interviews

Key informants provided much-needed information concerning the San Gabriel Valley and the needs of SGV residents and businesses. Interviewees included community-based organization staff, elected leaders, and law enforcement. Interviews were analyzed, and SGV MAT conducted content analysis for key themes.

Section 3: Data Collection Results

Key Informant Interviews

Of the key informants interviewed, the majority are Asian American and focused their responses on the San Gabriel Valley, and all but one of them were ethnic Chinese. The analysis of the key informant data revealed some primary themes, described here.

Characteristics of SGV Asian Americans

Most key informants observed that Asian Americans in the San Gabriel Valley do not use opioids. In general, during these interviews, vaping and then cannabis were among the key concerns raised. In addition, tobacco use and alcohol access were additional issues raised (especially with regard to newer Americans who tend to still smoke and drink more heavily and often than Asian Americans born in the San Gabriel Valley). One key informant said that working-class, Chinese immigrant parents, especially those who work part-time or in shifts, have very heavy workloads, and often cannot be fully engaged in childrearing.

Some key informants believed that ethnic media (including social media especially) play a significant role in reaching and influencing Chinese Americans, including substance use. Word of mouth (through friends) was equally mentioned. Vaping was repeatedly raised as an example of the drug of choice.

Community Perceptions of Drug Use

Most key informants discussed the negative perception of drug use overall. In addition, one key informant said that crime is related to drug use, but unlike in other communities, the crimes committed were between family members. Further, there was a theme that stigma and shame, among Asian American communities, likely led to lower use of opioids, but also would lead to a refusal by their families to address any drug addiction issues, as well as creating a barrier to accessing Medication Assisted Treatment. A couple of key informants noted that drug use is believed to be best dealt with either through prayer and going to church, or by having a family member's physician provide their approval for MAT (conversely, drug counselors and treatment providers are not seen as "legitimate" providers of healthcare services and seen as a "waste of time" with regard to substance use disorders).

Drug Use Norms

Key informants shared that drug use overall is not prevalent and an unacceptable norm among immigrants (although the use of alcohol and other drugs exists and will appear during domestic violence law enforcement encounters or removal of children by the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services). Many informants believed that this cultural rejection of illicit drug use will decline with acculturation, and that it is hard to convince Asian Americans born in the San Gabriel Valley about the dangers of illicit drugs versus more recent immigrants (this is correlated with much more permissive views of many immigrants

concerning “legalized sins” such as alcohol, tobacco, and gambling). Many key informants also linked opioid use to other types of addictive behaviors, including drinking and gambling.

Suggestions for Community Health Approaches

Several key informants thought that medical professionals (physicians) and would be necessary to include as part of a successful campaign. However, while these stakeholders would generally support harm reduction and science-based prevention messages, they might be loath to directly address some of these challenges.

Law enforcement was another potential ally because they were perceived to be able to enforce existing laws and deal with access to drugs. However, one key informant was concerned given the recent racial justice uprisings whether they were currently a useful ally. Another informant said that there needs to be a better relationship between the police and recent immigrants, given the history of law enforcement as antagonistic toward its citizens and suppressing human rights, depending on the San Gabriel Valley family’s country of origin.

While several key informants believed that opioid use disorder among Asian Americans may be too narrow for most community members to care for or feel urgent about (though most would be supportive), they suggested linking it to broader issues around smoking (including e-cigarettes) and other mental health issues such as anxiety and depression (related to COVID-19, the lockdown, and increased anti-Asian hate incidents), and working with community leaders in these areas.

The main take-away was increasing the number of “trusted messengers” who will be advocates to address OUD, SUD, and MAT. Some informants noted that some of the best spokespersons concerning gambling addiction come from the Cambodian community (within that community, a revered leader helped to establish a donut franchise empire [Donut King] as well as losing his entire fortune due to gambling addiction). In general, informants highly recommended the use of nonprofit agencies and key staff members as “trusted messengers” to augment OUD, SUD, and MAT information for Asian Americans of the San Gabriel Valley.

Section 4: Conclusions and Recommendations

This project highlighted the importance of relationships among community-based groups, community members, and elected officials. Much of the information collected as part of the assessment for this planning project relied heavily on gaining trust with key stakeholders and building relationships in the communities. This project elevated key lessons about engaging with Asian American communities in community health efforts: (1) the importance of building trust and rapport with community members, elected leaders, and key community-based organizations; (2) the potential impact of social desirability bias and cultural norms on information accuracy; (3) the nuances of micro-geographies and micro-communities within Los Angeles County and the San Gabriel Valley; and, (4) the outside impact of COVID-19 and the likelihood of multiple years of post-pandemic recovery upon any community health plan.

Building Trust and Rapport

This project took place in cities located in the San Gabriel Valley of Los Angeles County with high proportions of Asian immigrant communities. Residents and community leaders tend to be very protective of their communities and may be somewhat skeptical of outsiders proposing to conduct community health projects there. In order to work effectively in these communities, it is extraordinarily important to have sufficient time to build relationships with and gain the trust of those who live and work in Asian immigrant communities. There is an unfortunate trend of community health projects, evaluations, and research studies being conducted in diverse communities, only to leave after a few years with neither substantial nor long-lasting benefit to the community. Given this history, it is in the community's benefit to be wary of outsiders and to ensure that any projects conducted in their community prioritize those who live and work in that specific locale.

It is fair to say that SGV MAT may have underestimated the difficulty of establishing partnerships in multiple Asian American communities. Going into this project, NAPAFAASA had a track record of working in multiple Asian communities and had a team of Asian staff members and thus relied on the team's expertise to enter the communities of the San Gabriel Valley. However, the nuances of various ethnic groups, languages, nationalities, immigration histories, and generations in the San Gabriel Valley presented challenges. This resulted in the NAPAFAASA team having to become very specific about who the target population was for this project and to deeply understand the broad diversity within Asian communities.

Ultimately, NAPAFAASA staff was able to build trust with some local residents, community organizations, and elected officials. These successes in gaining trust was in large part due to personal relationships that were leveraged. For example, the project director knew people at community-based organizations in the San Gabriel Valley who were willing to support the project and the project director also knew elected officials and local leaders who were able to introduce NAPAFAASA to their communities. Without these personal relationships, the project likely would not have been as successful.

Recommendation 1

One of the key lessons that was learned through this project is that Asian Americans working in Asian communities may face challenges, that can best be addressed through “trusted messengers.”

To support continued education and access to Medication Assisted Treatment, it will be important for NAPAFASA to continue to develop and nurture strong relationships with community residents and social services agencies. There may need to be a specific strategy to obtain buy-in from gatekeeper residents and businesses. Furthermore, additional work on opioid use disorder should consider the development of working with existing coalitions that can broker relationships and navigate the local dynamics. This work with local coalitions will lend credibility to the project and also help to ensure that community health equity plans ultimately have a specific benefit to the community where they are being conducted. All of these activities will lead to the creation and access through “trusted messengers.”

Social Desirability Bias and Cultural Norms

Not surprisingly, we heard from stakeholders that there are very specific cultural norms related to drug use in Asian American communities. Because of these norms, our information may not accurately reflect the experiences of certain demographics whose drug use may carry more stigma. For example, the SGV MAT team observed more unhoused people with drug addiction issues near churches, than was acknowledged by key informants. Additionally, the team felt that many people were trying to provide the “right” answer when responding to queries about drug use and opioid use disorder in particular, despite the team’s assurances that there was no right answer and the intent of the meetings was to capture the actual experiences and behaviors of the local residents.

Recommendation 2

When conducting data collection in Asian American communities, the ways in which social desirability bias and cultural norms affect the data should be a priority. For example, Fisher and Katz (2008) suggest that social desirability bias (SDB) can help illuminate which values are of importance within a culture.[3] Future projects may want to explicitly elucidate values and cultural norms related to opioid use within Asian American communities.

Micro-geographies and Diversity

The San Gabriel Valley is an area of Los Angeles County made up of 47 neighborhoods, covering 284 square miles, with a population of over 1.4 million residents.[4] The local context in which this project was conducted is important because experiences are likely to differ greatly among specific micro-geographies and ethnic/racial groups. For example, some areas in the San Gabriel Valley, such as San Marino and South Pasadena, are much more affluent (and have greater access to treatment options, as well as basic information about NARCAN and Medication Assisted Treatment). In these communities we expect there may be different

cultural and community norms related to opioid use disorder (including the nearby and accessible robust homelessness prevention and direct services program). Finally, there are considerable generational differences within the neighborhoods of the San Gabriel Valley. For example, Temple City's median age is 38 and is considered old for the San Gabriel Valley and Los Angeles County. South El Monte's median age is 25 and considered young for the San Gabriel Valley and the County.[4] As this community health equity plan increases awareness and access to MAT, the plan must pay greater attention to specific cities for education work.

Recommendation 3

There is a great amount of diversity within the communities that make up the San Gabriel Valley. Future projects in Asian American communities may benefit from specifying with greater specificity who the target population is in terms of race/ethnicity, nationality, immigration history, language preference, age, nativity, and additional demographic factors. The more that can be said about the populations highlighted within a community health equity plan, the greater the potential there might be for the results to be salient in other communities.

COVID-19, Global Pandemic, Lockdown, and Hate Incidents

This project experienced significant challenges due to the novel coronavirus. The greatest challenge during this past year was coping with the global pandemic's impact on our organization and programs. The statewide stay-at-home directive affected our ability to coordinate with organizations and community leaders who were also affected by social distancing and the cancellation of in-person meetings. In addition, since mid-March 2020, the conversation about opioid use disorder has had to incorporate information about COVID-19 resources (rental assistance, unemployment benefits, low-cost access to internet and technology), in addition to drug treatment resources.

Before the lockdown, much of the barriers involved developing authentic partnerships with SGV Asian Americans. This required creating partnerships with nonprofit agencies that already provide social services to local residents and businesses. Since the lockdown, social services agencies support the community through social media (Facebook Live, YouTube, and WeChat), phone calls, texting, and even Zoom.

In addition, trusted service providers were necessary to address issues related to geographic, cultural, and linguistic isolation and breaking through to build awareness and develop the trust of Asian American immigrant communities in the San Gabriel Valley.

Finally, the community health equity plan will not be pertinent to the local community as long as San Gabriel Valley residents remain under lockdown. Based on feedback from local elected officials, moving forward to address opioid use disorder among Asian Americans in the San Gabriel Valley is important, but any movement forward will happen after the community has addressed issues that will allow nearly unrestricted return to in-person activities such as going out to strip malls for shopping and going to school.

Recommendation 4

The community health equity plan needs to address anti-Asian hate incidents, increased mental health needs, and social isolation of Asian Americans, under the context of COVID-19. Local officials and leaders see economic instability, decreased resources, and ongoing language barriers for Asian Americans of San Gabriel Valley as immediate needs that will have to be addressed, in conjunction with plans to increase awareness of Medication Assisted Treatment and opioid use disorder.

Conclusion

We learned that many people care about reducing opioid use disorders in Asian American communities. Our data collection suggests that residents and community leaders alike are supportive of policies and practice that reduce and prevent opioid addiction. However, we also heard that this issue may be too narrow to inspire urgency in community members and policy makers. The assessment also uplifted many challenges related to conducting community health planning in Asian American communities. Social desirability bias and cultural norms related to opioid use may have skewed the data (suppressed evidence of opioid addiction). However, these are important considerations for future projects as any community health plan with Asian American communities will need to incorporate cultural values and norms.

It may be helpful to consider broader public health impact areas that are related to this project to gain support from a wider constituency. With the COVID-19 pandemic, increased mental health challenges from the lockdown, and rise in anti-Asian hate incidents, opioid use disorder prevention work can and should be incorporated into the San Gabriel Valley's overall COVID-19 recovery phase in years future.

References

1. California Tobacco Education and Research Oversight Committee. New Challenges—New Promise for All: Master Plan 2018-2020. Sacramento, CA: California Tobacco Education and Research Oversight Committee. 2018: p. 18.
2. Carr, K., et al., *California Chinese American Tobacco Use Survey*. 2004, California Department of Health Services Tobacco Control Section, : Sacramento.
3. Fisher, R. and J.E. Katz, *Social-Desirability Bias and the Validity of Self-Reported Values*. *Psychology & Marketing*, 2000. 17 (February): p. 105-120.
4. Los Angeles Times. *Mapping L.A: The San Gabriel Valley*. 2020: Available from: <http://maps.latimes.com/neighborhoods/region/san-gabriel-valley/>.