The National Asian Pacific Islander Prosecutors Association (NAPIPA): Prosecutorial Diversity Educates and Empowers Diverse Communities

by Edward Liang and Sandip Patel

The Importance of Diversity

According to recently released U.S. Census Bureau numbers, Asians have become the fastest growing minority group in the nation.¹ As the landscape of communities around the country and California change, the need for an organization like the National Asian Pacific Islander Prosecutors Association (NAPIPA) becomes more apparent. In many of these communities, the criminal justice system—and law enforcement in particular—are perceived as unfriendly, unfair, incomprehensible, and something to be avoided. Victims and witnesses are often reluctant to report crimes or cooperate in any meaningful fashion.

NAPIPA and other similar organizations have been created in response to those feelings of misunderstanding and mistrust within diverse populations. Advocating reflected diversity in law enforcement brings people into the criminal justice system with experiences and perspectives similar
to members of those populations. Prosecutors who understand the needs, concerns, and sensitivities of a particular ethnicity or culture are able to not only serve as role models for that community, but also provide a valuable voice within the criminal justice system for its members. In short, prosecutors with diverse backgrounds not only communicate with the diverse populations in a community—but for them as well. In such a way, they can make law enforcement and the criminal justice system more relevant, approachable, and accessible to all.

Nothing speaks as clearly to how organizations like NAPIPA can make a difference as this example: In recent years, elderly Chinese women in San Francisco, Boston, Chicago, and New York became targets of “blessing scams.” Con artists from China traveled throughout large cities, convincing victims that their families would face tragedy if they did not receive the blessings that the cons were selling. These criminals played upon the superstitions and cultural beliefs of their victims. To successfully prosecute these perpetrators, prosecutors needed to not only understand those cultural beliefs, but also be able to get the cooperation of victims who were traditionally unwilling to report crimes to the police. In San Francisco, prosecutors and investigators were able to successfully engage the Asian American community with a marketing campaign that explained the blessing scam and stressed the importance of reporting con artists. In the process, San Francisco prosecutors and investigators were able to build trust in a community that has historically been wary of law enforcement. As a result, at least one potential San Francisco victim was spared and several perpetrators were caught and successfully prosecuted. Without an office that reflected the diversity of its community, these prosecutions likely would not have been as effective.

The History of NAPIPA

The roots of NAPIPA began in early 2010 when a group of Asian and Pacific Islander (API) prosecutors from the San Francisco Bay Area came together informally—from local, state, and federal offices—to discuss obstacles they all encountered during their...
careers. For example, few had role models who had aspired to become judges, and many did not have mentors who were able to share best practices and solutions for dealing with these obstacles. They also wanted to ensure that their respective offices better reflected the communities they represented.

These meetings led to a plan to build an organization that would address the issues identified and advocate for its members. The initial group contacted API prosecutors from around the country to see if there was enough interest in starting such an organization. After receiving positive feedback, NAPIPA was incorporated in 2010, and developed a network of prosecutors throughout the country. Kick-off events were held in Chicago, Northern California, and New York in 2011.

NAPIPA currently has four chapters—Northern California, Southern California, Chicago, and New York—each run by a regional board. NAPIPA is governed by the national board, which consists of each individual chapter’s president as well as other board members, who develop and decide the steps necessary to achieve NAPIPA’s goals.

NAPIPA aims to accomplish the following:

- Develop an information network relevant to the needs of Asian American law enforcement personnel.
- Seek out, encourage, and support Asian American law students and attorneys interested in pursuing careers in law enforcement.
- Provide training—both academic and practical—concerning a wide variety of law enforcement-related topics of interest.
- Educate the Asian American community regarding the criminal justice system, and provide a forum for communicating the community’s needs and concerns.
- Promote, strengthen, and support the roles of Asian Americans in all aspects of law enforcement.
As part of its outreach program, NAPIPA has sponsored several events to educate the community about the criminal justice system, empowering members of the community with information related to topics such as elder fraud, human trafficking, and domestic violence. NAPIPA has also conducted trainings for law enforcement officers on topics including the recovery of digital forensic evidence. In addition to working with the community, NAPIPA has worked closely with organizations such as the Asian Pacific Islander American Public Affairs Association (APAPA) and Asian Americans for Community Involvement (AACI). By building coalitions with these organizations, NAPIPA has been able to more effectively disseminate information to a wider segment of the community about important topics in the criminal justice system.

In one of its most important roles, NAPIPA has hosted panels at various law schools about the path to become a prosecutor. One of NAPIPA’s main goals is to help create a conduit for future prosecutors who reflect the communities they represent. This year, NAPIPA awarded its first scholarships to law school students interested in becoming prosecutors.

As NAPIPA has matured, some members have moved into other influential and inspirational positions. Within the past few years, two NAPIPA members became members of the judiciary. Pamela Chen, a former Assistant United States Attorney and a board member of the New York chapter, now serves as a federal district court judge in the United States District Court for the Eastern District of New York. Alison Matsumoto Estrada, a Los Angeles County deputy district attorney and president of the Southern California chapter, recently won an election to become a judge in the Los Angeles County Superior Court.

Nonetheless, a lot of work remains to be done. The state judiciary still does not reflect the diversity of the state, and there are few minority-elected district attorneys. The importance of NAPIPA’s work lies in encouraging diversity in prosecutor’s offices, which will naturally support diversity throughout the criminal justice system.
NAPIPA Moves Forward

On April 19, 2014, NAPIPA held its first scholarship banquet at the Crowne Plaza in Foster City. NAPIPA honored four law school students with the *C.C. Yin for Justice Scholarship* to help them reach their goals of becoming prosecutors. The crowd of 250 included local dignitaries and CDAA members: Santa Clara County District Attorney Jeff Rosen; San Mateo County District Attorney Steve Wagstaffe; Contra Costa County District Attorney Mark Peterson; and San Francisco City and County District Attorney George Gascón. California Supreme Court Justice Goodwin Liu delivered the keynote speech during which he described his own journey to become a justice. The event, built upon a foundation that took years to develop, did not seem possible even just a few years ago.

NAPIPA continues to expand its membership base and conduct events for law enforcement and the public. Additional chapters will be added as interest in NAPIPA increases. With the help of CDAA, and continued support from leaders like District Attorney Rosen, NAPIPA will be better equipped to further its goals of having prosecutors who best reflect the public in order to most effectively represent their interests in the criminal justice system.

For more information, please visit us at www.napipa.org.

The authors thank Assistant United States Attorney Hanley Chew who made valuable contributions to this article.

ENDNOTES


3. *Id.*
