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Asian-Americans in Minnesota face insults, hostility during virus outbreak

By Maya Rao (<https://www.startribune.com/maya-rao/137958973/>) Star Tribune |

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Alvin Moua returned from work to his Woodbury townhouse this week to find an anonymous letter taped to the door: “We’re watching you [expletives], take the chinese virus back to china. We don’t want you ... infecting us with your diseases!!!!!!!!!!!!”

The note was signed, “your friendly neighbors.”

“My blood was boiling,” recalled Moua, a 28-year-old account manager at a staffing agency who is a native-born American of Hmong descent.

Some Asian-Americans in the Twin Cities and across the nation are facing hostility as the U.S. becomes the country with the largest number of cases of COVID-19, caused by a virus that President Donald Trump controversially dubbed the “Chinese flu.”

In New York, an Asian-American woman was punched (<https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/nyc-crime/ny-asian-woman-assaulted-midtown-coronavirus-fears-20200311-aiyrgf3r15b7jclbx4r2iipana-story.html>) in the face by a woman who denounced her heritage and demanded to know where her face mask was. In California, a 16-year-old Asian-American boy was attacked (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coronavirus-bullies-attack-asian-teen-los-angeles-accusing-him-of-having-coronavirus/>) by classmates who accused him of carrying the virus.

In Minnesota, people of Southeast Asian descent more commonly report getting rude looks or comments from other patrons in stores, community leaders say.

The Minnesota Department of Human Rights says it has started to hear about bias incidents targeting Asian-Americans. And state agencies, such as the Department of Health, are reminding people not to make assumptions about who has the disease based on their ethnic background.

Public health experts have discouraged attaching a nationality to the virus and raised concerns that Trump’s word choice could increase xenophobic attacks, though Trump has said that he’s being accurate, not racist. The president clarified this week that it was important to “protect our Asian-American community” and that the spread of COVID-19 is not their fault.

As an investigator in the Attorney General’s Office, Thai Heu has been tracking bias complaints from the Asian-American community and visited Moua’s home Thursday to interview him. He also interviewed a Hmong apartment manager in Woodbury who found a handwritten note in a box where rent payments are dropped off that read, “Go back to your country or I kill you, Chinese!”

Heu said he knows many Hmong people who have been getting ammunition and weapons to protect themselves and their families.

The tension hit home recently for Mysee Chang, a 28-year-old resident of St. Paul, when she got a phone call from her Hmong step-grandmother who said through tears, “I don’t feel safe, what do I do?”

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Alvin Moua and his wife, Vanishia Yang, of Woodbury.

As shoppers clamored to get groceries to ride out the pandemic, Chang said, a man confronted her step-grandmother for taking one of the last packages of chicken. Chang said the man apparently thought her grandmother was Chinese and said, “You are the reason why this is happening, so you don’t deserve this meat.”

A cousin who lives in the Woodbury apartment complex where the death threat was sent said she fears someone will be watching when she goes out.

Chang said she has been working to relay precautions about social distancing to Hmong elders and has encouraged relatives to postpone two traditional funerals that would have brought out hundreds of people. But while she feels she knows how to handle the public health aspect of the pandemic, she’s unsure how to protect her family against racism.

“I no longer feel safe,” she said.

State Rep. Jay Xiong, DFL-St. Paul, said in a Facebook post that he rolled down his car window in a store parking lot recently and realized that a man was yelling racist comments at him.

“Among the obscenities he hurled included calling me a [racial slur] and telling me that a disease-ridden person like myself should go back to my country,” Xiong said.

“I am both saddened and outraged that as a Hmong-American born and raised in St. Paul, I had to hear such racist nonsense,” he wrote. “I have heard similar stories out in [the] community, and there have been worse manifestations of such incidents, which include violence.”

Xiong did not respond to requests for an interview.

“It’s these types of things that we’re hearing about,” said Taylor Putz, a spokesman for the Minnesota Department of Human Rights. Putz noted, however, that the agency’s authority extends only to discrimination in housing, employment and education.

“So if your neighbor calls and yells at you and says, ‘Go back to your country with your virus because you’re Asian,’ although that’s not a friendly thing to do at all, that’s not [what] falls under the Minnesota Human Rights Act,” he said.

In Woodbury, Moua’s landlord reported the racist note to the police.

“Ninety-nine percent of the community is great — I haven’t had an issue,” Moua said. “It’s always just that one person that ruins it.”

Members of the Coalition of Asian American Leaders network have reported recent bias incidents related to the virus, such as cashiers refusing to serve them, according to executive director Bo Thao-Urabe. The coalition is holding a webinar April 10 to talk about dealing with xenophobia and discrimination during the pandemic. Featured speakers include Asian-American historian Erika Lee and Minnesota Department of Human Rights Commissioner Rebecca Lucero.

Thao-Urabe said she’s heard complaints, mainly from people of Southeast Asian descent — like the Hmong — who are not even Chinese-American. Minnesota’s sizable Hmong population began arriving as refugees from Laos in the 1970s.

“If a person is choosing to be racist, they’re not thinking about asking if you’re Chinese or if you’re a different ethnicity,” she said.

Zhuoling Ren, founder and president of the China Institute of Traditional Chinese Medicine, said her patients have been understanding and that the virus has not affected her St. Paul clinic or the way she’s been treated as an individual. By and large, Ren considers Minnesotans loving people.

“We’re tied with the whole community — we are not just Asian and Chinese, we’re also American residents and citizens as well,” Ren said.

Ren said Trump’s comment warning against blaming Asian-Americans for the virus “helps a little bit.”

“Those people who are trying to put hatred and complaints and frustrations toward Asian-Americans and Chinese-Americans, I think that’s not fair,” she said. “It’s really ridiculous.”

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