

The Story of Gathering Strength: Empowering Immigrant and Refugee Community Leaders and Building the Power of the Margins



ASIAN PACIFIC ISLANDER INSTITUTE ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
WITH
HANH CAO YU, PH.D.
SOCIAL POLICY RESEARCH ASSOCIATES
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THE STORY OF GATHERING STRENGTH: EMPOWERING IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE COMMUNITY LEADERS AND BUILDING THE POWER OF THE MARGINS

A Case Study

People are agents in their own lives, families, and communities. Empowering those most impacted to be leaders can have a ripple (multiplier effect), to raise their capacity to address other issues in the future too. Exponential impact/good that is sustainable in the long term.

– Asian and Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence

Fueled by a strong belief that the community members most impacted by a problem must be the ones defining it, making decisions about responses, and identifying solutions, the Asian and Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence (API Institute) launched the Gathering Strength Project in 2012 as the prototype of a radically different approach to ending domestic violence in immigrant/refugee communities. Rather than working to increase the cultural competency of “mainstream” domestic violence service agencies that may serve some members of the target populations, the Gathering Strength project invested in advocates already working within immigrant/refugee communities or in culturally specific anti-domestic violence (DV) programs that are often marginalized and invisible in the mainstream DV field.

The Gathering Strength Project, supported by a grant from the Blue Shield Against Violence Cultural Competency Project,¹ aimed to support the development of women leaders from new immigrant and refugee communities and empower them to articulate the root causes of violence in their communities and develop community-centered solutions. In this way, the project worked toward the same ultimate goal—ending domestic violence in communities of color—as efforts focused more directly on “cultural competency,” but did so in a way that API Institute believed was more effective for these communities and sustainable in the long term. This strategy was consistent with the “theory of change” that API Institute articulated for the project: the more leaders are empowered to determine for themselves the strategies and solutions to be used within their own communities, the greater the potential for them to be impactful and sustain social change efforts.

This case study tells the story of the Gathering Strength project, from API Institute’s gathering of key leaders and testing of key approaches in the project to the subsequent impact of the program on the participating leaders and their communities.

¹ The Blue Shield Against Violence (BSAV), a program of the Blue Shield of California Foundation, commissioned research focused on defining cultural competency and examining the barriers and opportunities to advance cultural competency in California’s domestic violence (DV) field. Asian Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence was one of 17 community organizations that received two-year grants (2011 -2013) from the Blue Shield of California Foundation.

The Gathering of Leaders

A key component of the Gathering Strength project's success was API Institute's clarity around the strengths-based criteria for selecting leaders for the project's Advisory Committee (AC). This was critical not only to finding individual leaders to be change agents for ending domestic violence in their communities, but also to forming a group of women who could enrich and complexify each other's development as leaders in this work. Tapping into API Institute's extensive networks for nominations, the outreach and application process allowed the API Institute team to identify potential Advisory Committee members who were new to them. API Institute looked for those who deeply understood the needs and strengths of their communities and the opportunities for change, and who possessed deep-rooted networks in those communities that would allow them to bring back and share the learnings from Gathering Strength. Also critical was candidates' ability to garner trust, create effective circles of support, and develop community-driven **networks for social change** within immigrant/refugee communities.

STRENGTHS-BASED SELECTION CRITERIA for Advisory Committee Members





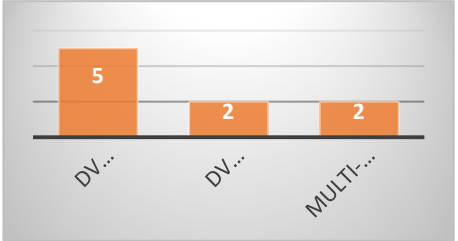




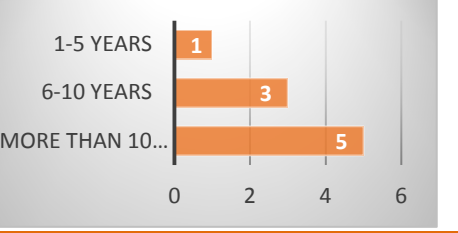






- Represent a range of immigrant/refugee organizations, geographic regions, as well as racial, ethnic, and faith communities
- Capable of reflecting the immense ethnic, linguistic and cultural pluralism of the API immigrant/refugee population of California
- Knowledgeable about the needs of their communities
- Have relationships to new community networks

The API Institute team deliberately ensured diversity within this group of immigrant and refugee leaders in terms of racial/ethnic identity, language, region, and years of experience working with immigrant/refugee communities. This is illustrated by the graphic on page 3. Their rationale for ensuring that diverse stakeholders were at the table was that the Advisory Committee should reflect the diversity of the communities being served:

The diversity of the Gathering String Advisory Committee was intentional because it lifted up distinctions and disparities within the category of immigrants and refugees and—with the designation Asian and Pacific Islander—between different waves of immigration, etc., and counteracted dominant narratives that obscure them. It complicated notions of “cultural competency” deemed necessary to serve groups of people with such complex histories and needs, and challenged notions of cultures/communities as static and know-able.

Despite the tremendous diversity within the Advisory Committee, its members shared some common characteristics. All identified as first-generation immigrants or refugees and showed a readiness to break out of their isolation to develop their leadership to benefit their communities. Some had multinational identities and were versed in effectively crossing the linguistic and cultural borders of the countries in which they have resided.

OVERVIEW OF DIVERSITY OF THE COHORT OF ADVOCATES
ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERS AND API INSTITUTE TEAM²

	<p>Geographic Distribution (Number of members) Los Angeles: 2 Central Valley: 1 Bay Area: 4 San Diego: 1 Sacramento: 1</p>	<p>Type of Organization and DV Experience (Number of members)</p>	
			
	<p>Experience with Immigrant / Refugee Communities (Number of Years)</p>	<p>Experience with Immigrant / Refugee Communities (Number of Years)</p>	
	<p>Languages: Fluent in Arabic, Kurdish, Taiwanese, Korean, Portuguese, Spanish, Urdu, Hindi, Kashmiri, Malay, Cantonese, Mandarin, Tibetan, Nepali, Punjabi</p>		
	<p>Languages: Fluent in Arabic, Kurdish, Taiwanese, Korean, Portuguese, Spanish, Urdu, Hindi, Kashmiri, Malay, Cantonese, Mandarin, Tibetan, Nepali, Punjabi</p>	<p>Faith Backgrounds: Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist</p>	
			

Key Elements of Gathering Strength

Gathering Strength supported the building of a strong and coordinated network of DV service providers through several major emphases: (1) establishing a “beloved community,” (2) co-creating the agenda, and (3) focusing on “building the power of the margins.”³

² The API Team consists of Beckie Masaki, Nancy Wan, Christy Chung, and Sarah Khan (who was on the AC). The team is shown in the right column in the last four photos.

³ An external influence is the alignment of this project with other national efforts to pivot and advance the movement to end DV that are also grounded in principles of “building the power of the margins,” such as NoVo Foundation’s Move to End Violence (MEV) initiative and other spheres of the work of the API Institute such as the Network Circles and Circle of Strength projects. This alignment creates a powerful synergy, and collectively leverages greater impact on the field and movement.

Asian and Pacific Islander DV advocates often report doing their work in isolation. Gathering Strength was designed to address this sense of isolation by creating a “beloved community”—a strong network of DV service providers who are from API communities. Building a beloved community began with the selection of advocates from immigrant/refugee communities across California who would serve on the Advisory Committee. Specific program components designed to build beloved community included the creation of a supportive peer-to-peer learning community to provide peer coaching support, case consultation, advice on organizational issues, inspiration, and creative strategies, and ongoing skills-building for all participants.

In addition, API Institute intentionally practiced shared leadership at all levels of this project—among API Institute staff members, AC members, and participants. The project sought to proactively address the power hierarchies inherent in grant-funded, institution-driven work with communities by modeling collaboration over competition and by emphasizing “power-with” rather than “power-over.” When the AC first convened, API Institute asked AC members to identify what they wanted to do as partners and made it clear that the

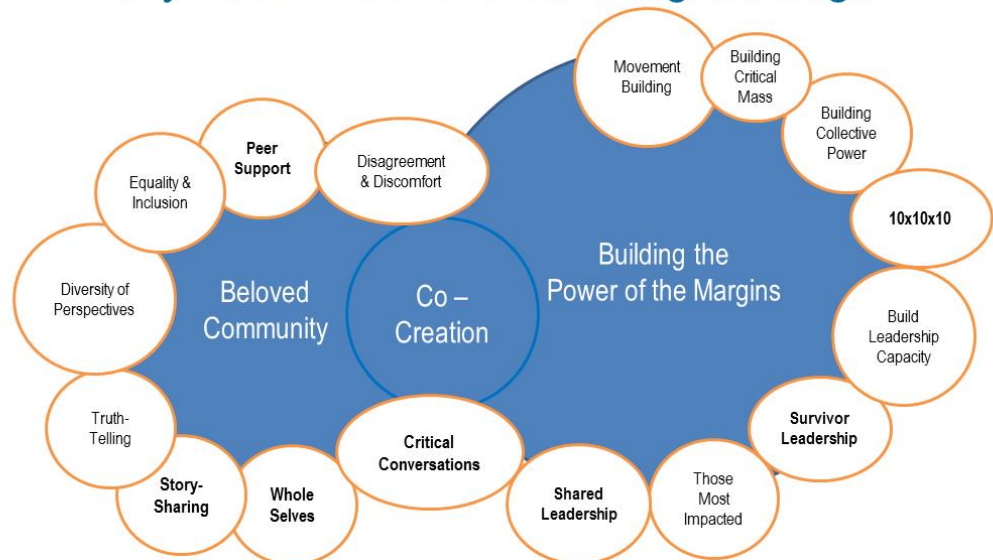
workplan was open-ended and would be co-created with the API Institute, based on what they thought was most needed and most impactful. Consistent with API Institute’s values of shared leadership and co-creation, the team asked AC members to engage with each other in a manner completely different from the “top-down model” they were accustomed to, which eventually led to creative ideas that they had not been able to articulate before. By engaging in beloved community and co-creating the program and agenda, the leaders prepared themselves to “build power at the margins.”

To **build the power of those at the margins**, API Institute encouraged AC members to develop partnerships with each other in the form of Regional Teams, and to engage with peers outside of the AC to design regional convenings and recruit participants. Gathering Strength used a **10x10x10 organizing/empowerment model**⁴ to help the AC to build beloved community among community members at the regional convenings. (See textbox below for more details.) The members of the AC were expected to foster the engagement and leadership of more immigrant/refugee survivor-leaders in the work to end DV in their communities; they formed local peer networks of activist-leaders in Los

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⁴ The 10X10X10 model was derived from Apne App, an organization working to stop sex trafficking in India.

Key Elements of Gathering Strength



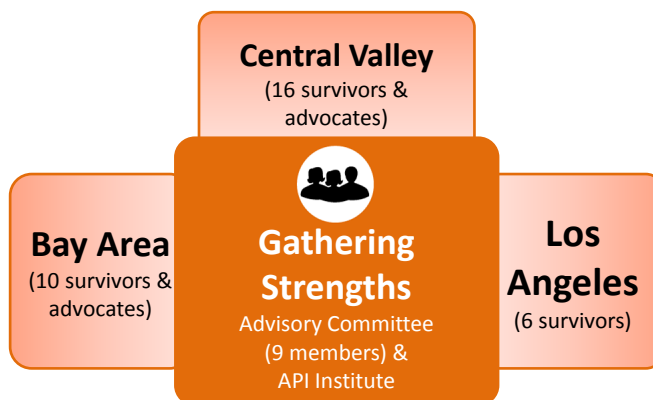
Angeles, the Bay Area, and Central Valley. Additionally, the API Institute's 2013 National Summit provided a forum for the members of the Advisory Committee to present a workshop together, which showcased their leadership and brought opportunities for them to strengthen their individual and collective ties to a broader national network of API DV advocates and programs.

A MODEL OF GRASSROOTS, COMMUNITY-BASED MOVEMENT-BUILDING⁵

This Gathering Strength project has enabled API Institute to practice and model a **10x10x10 movement-building infrastructure** as a strategy to support culturally competent practice. This approach to building critical mass starts with activating/training 10 individuals, who each then organize/train/activate another 10 activists, who then each organize/activate another 10 activists, etc.. It provided a structure for a cohort of advocates from high-need, underserved immigrant/refugee communities to come together to articulate the problem (that the needs of survivors in their communities are not being met), develop a solution, and begin implementing it. The project's institutional backing by API Institute and the Blue Shield of California Foundation helped to raise the visibility and credibility of Advisory Committee members, providing a platform for them to be recognized as leaders on cultural competency in their organizations and in the DV field.

The 10x10x10 project structure also allowed the Advisory Committee to implement a multi-site, grassroots, community-based movement-building plan to engage survivors and build their capacity (1) to be leaders in the movement, (2) to serve as living examples and positive role models in their communities of survivor strength and resilience, (3) to serve as alternative points of contact and gateways for survivors just starting to reach out, and (4) to contribute to a critical mass that demands community accountability.

The graphic below that shows the relationship between the Advisory Committee, the API Institute Team, Regional teams, and number of participants who participated in local regional convening.



Project Outcomes and Impacts

Deep human connections can be effectively developed through narrative/oral history. Sharing stories is an important way we can affirm the expertise of those most impacted, build their leadership to drive strategic action and to ultimately influence communities, organizations, policies and systems.

- API Institute

Although it is early to speak about longer-term social change outcomes, some significant individual level outcomes have been reported by the Advisory Committee members. Through Gathering Strength, they were able to more clearly recognize the assets and strengths they possessed for addressing issues in the immigrant/ethnic communities served and to identify what is needed to more effectively serve the immigrant/refugee community. Further, the project provided a critical means for DV advocates to attend to their own emotional well-being and to build the resilience needed for long-term, sustainable movement-building. As leaders, they can leverage this personal growth and

⁵ See the API Institute Final BSAV Cultural Competency Final Grant Report (2014), p. 8.

strengthening and translate it into meaningful progress in reducing domestic violence in their communities. Overall, several distinct areas of personal, leadership-development impact can be identified:

- **Increased capacity to be more reflective and to assess strengths from within.** One Advisory Committee member spoke about the challenge of being able to think about her organization's work and reflect on a day-to-day basis. She spoke about the insights that have blossomed within the venues that Gathering Strength has created. In this space, API leaders reported the ability to "reflect on what we are doing, re-evaluate, build on what works, throw out what doesn't, learn from each other, and become more jazzy, strong, and sharp-minded and to warm our hearts."
- **Mindfulness about the importance of considering cultural context when seeking to replicate "successful" models.** Another leader observed that there are many well-intentioned DV providers trying to build the capacity of immigrant and refugee communities. However, without understanding the cultural context of API communities, they continue to simply replicate what has worked in one community, which may or may not work in the next. This leader described her learnings around what it takes to succeed:

As we think about strengthening cultural competency, what I have learned is that it takes an attitude of "cultural humility" to listen and try to understand the needs of our communities. The work of listening and understanding is accomplished when I give the time and space to listen well.

To that end, this leader invited allies, funders, and communities to listen together to the survivors' stories, which hold the key to how the DV field moves forward to end violence against women and girls.

- **Experiencing of safe space and truth-telling in the sharing of stories.** In each regional convening, Advisory Committee members created safe spaces where the personal stories of struggle and resilience of the advocates/activists/survivors could emerge and be nurtured, powerfully situated within an API anti-domestic violence movement driven by survivor-leaders past and present. Experiencing this truth-telling was transformative because, as API Institute explains, "deeply human stories" have the power to "move hearts and minds, and change attitudes around DV from victim-blaming to community accountability, and shift gender norms from hetero-patriarchy to gender equity, in ways that are meaningful to day-to-day lives." API Institute staff members believe that this strategy will also impact systems in terms of local, state, and federal policy, as community readiness grows and opportunities arise.

Example 1: Central Valley Regional Convening

"Thanks to Mary and Sitra for their vision in putting this meeting together. Thanks to all the facilitators for their knowledge and expertise and for being pioneers in this field. It is people who are willing to push the system like you ladies who have paved the way for all of us."

"I have learned so much today. My next step is to be mindful of how my presence as an advocate can help clients [and to] be more active in the community and educate."

A CIRCLE OF STRENGTH
FOR HONG WOMEN TO END VIOLENCE

Attention Advocates and Survivors
you're invited to come join us for a day of empowerment...

April 25, 2013
9:00 am - 3:30 pm

Sierra Health Foundation
1321 Garden Hwy, Sacramento, CA 95833

Be a part of a circle of strength to build non-violent families and communities. We hope to:

- Celebrate our strengths and the power of coming together.
- Think together about ways we can support peace in our communities.
- Share about the challenges of addressing domestic violence in our communities, and ways we can work together to face them.
- Build our capacity to care for ourselves and grow our leadership together.

For more information and to RSVP please contact:

Villy Crisis Center: MarLee: marlee@msaapi.org
My Sisters House: Sitra: ghzanshi@gmail.com
API DV (Asian & Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence):
Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence:
Nancy Wan: nwan@apiddv.org

Breakfast and Lunch will be provided.
A portion of the API Institute on Domestic Violence, with support from Blue Shield Against Violence, a program of the Blue Shield of California Foundation.

"I'm empowered to take this subject more seriously and to be the change and advocate for which I want to see in the future."

"This gathering is something I've always wanted to do."

"I know that there are other resources and organizations to turn to when my own is lacking. The next steps for me is to address the lack of support that my organization provides for me as an advocate and my community."

EXAMPLE 2:

BUILDING SURVIVOR LEADERSHIP BY BUILDING THEIR CAPACITY FOR STORY TELLING

The Los Angeles Regional Team convened a group of six API domestic-violence survivors so that they could critically explore community and personal understandings of DV and its harms, identify factors that contribute to resilience and help-seeking, provide feedback about agency-based outreach and intervention effectiveness, and consider the impact they can make in shifting the field and community for themselves and other API survivors. Each survivor was paired with a volunteer-advocate who worked as a one-on-one coach over six months to help support the survivor in crafting and understanding her personal story, lifting out the strengths, and cultivating her leadership and activism. The goal was to encourage the survivors to see themselves as activists with the power to create change by speaking out about their lived experiences.

- **Development of courage to engage in critical conversations about social norms in communities.** At the Central Valley convening organized by two Advisory Committee members, Hmong community members were asked difficult questions such as the following: “What causes domestic/family abuse in our community?” What is your role in ending family abuse in the context of your family, clan, community and workplace? What is hard about this? What do you think it will take to end gender violence in the community?” These topics suggest the magnitude and seriousness of the conversations taking place and the extent to which advocates/survivors are thinking about their roles and identifying solutions to gender-based violence in their communities. The fact that these difficult conversations are occurring is significant because DV is seldom, if ever, discussed publicly in this community and Hmong advocates themselves report facing tremendous hostility from their communities when broaching this taboo subject.
- **Increased role in an international network to change social norms.** Some members of the Advisory Committee began to work on national social norm-changing campaigns. According to API Institute, the Gathering Strength work was being amplified because the connection with the Midwest Hmong community was part of the international campaign called *Building Our Future*. One Advisory Committee member and her group had been part of trying to interrupt the social-cultural norm of abusive forced marriage in the Hmong community. This was the first time they were coming together as an intentional network of Hmong advocates. They were able to build on this work through the API Institute summit, and connect with other Hmong leaders who came to the national summit. API Institute team members explained that being a part of Gathering Strength and the API Institute summit “enabled them to connect to this large picture.”

In summary, at the end of Phase 1 of API Institute’s work on Gathering Strength, outcomes and impacts are most apparent among the individual AC members and the participants in the regional convenings. Early reports of social norm-changing activities are encouraging at the local, regional, and even national levels. As Gathering Strength proceeds in Phase 2 of the Blue Shield Against Violence Cultural Competency Project, it will be critical to track longer-term effects on the communities and on attitudes and norms about gender-based violence.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

The Gathering Strength Project surfaced a number of challenges associated with trying to do work that builds power at the margin. Leaders often faced resistance from both their host organizations and from the communities themselves.

At the organizational level, an AC member in Southern California had to work to persuade her “mainstream” DV agency to value the work of ethnic-specific programs, not just by subcontracting for minority community outreach, but more substantively and for the longer-term by funding partnerships. Similarly, members of the Hmong Advocates Network formed by the Central Valley Regional Team faced challenges in obtaining organizational support to participate. They struggled to convince their supervisors that organizing work with other Hmong advocates is integral to service-provision work and should be supported as paid time. One AC member reported that without financial sponsorship from the API Institute, she would not have been able to attend the National Summit due to lack of support from her own agency. Even with API Institute’s offer of support, a few agencies refused to allow AC members to use work time to attend the Summit, and reversing this determination required the direct intervention of the API Institute.

At the partnership and community levels, one AC member’s organization faced backlash from the political leadership of its community based on the questions that her organization was raising around domestic violence in the community. The leader and her organization were pressured to be subsumed under the community association and faced threats. In another example, members of a regional team wanted to tap into their local API DV taskforce. However, their proposal for a project designed to lift up the voices of survivors and develop their leadership in the movement to end DV was met with skepticism and hesitation by task force members. Others on the taskforce did not share their social justice values, and so they had to rely on each other.

Other challenges were logistical, stemming from the attempt to organize survivors across communities with distinct cultural and linguistic identities. These challenges included finding times to meet amidst work and family obligations; dealing with the travel limitations of public transportation; taking care of child-care needs; and surmounting language barriers in group conversations.

From having directly taken on these challenges, a number of key lessons have emerged.

Lesson 1. Creating “beloved community” is a fundamental and powerful strategy for social change.

When they belong to a “beloved community,” people are invited to come to the table as their whole selves—each person is not only a survivor, but also an advocate, and a person with multiple identities on the various axes of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, background, job title, and so on. “When we bring our whole selves to the table, with all of their complexities and messy contradictions,” explains API Institute, “we bring our best thinking, put on a much more creative intersectional lens to the analysis that can open up unforeseen possibilities and more innovative ideas.” Creating beloved community also becomes a critical foundation for bridging divisions, finding commonalities, and working collaboratively:

[Beloved community] allows our deeper, more authentic selves to be present, and creates an environment where people can speak their truths and share her-stories, each equally valued in its own right. It creates an environment of inclusion and equality, where each person has a unique gift, some important knowledge to offer, and each person is also a learning partner. In telling stories, differences can emerge and be embraced and so can points of connection, the common purpose or shared vision that forms a common ground to stand on for collaborative work going forward.

Having witnessed failed social change efforts in the past, API Institute believes that activists cannot do the work of transforming the world and ending gender-based violence unless all involved are in interdependent relationships and committed to taking on work that is too vast and complex for any one person or group.

Lesson 2: Lifting up the voices and experiences of survivors from immigrant/refugee communities can be an effective pathway for instigating systems change.

The premise from which this project sprang—that it is more impactful to invest in what can be learned from the lived experiences of domestic violence survivors from API immigrant/refugee communities than to build the capacity of those who have little cultural competency or knowledge of API communities—is validated by the experiences of those participating in Gathering Strength. Attention and resources are best devoted to advocates who are from and working in immigrant/refugee communities and the culturally specific DV programs that are often marginalized and invisible in the mainstream DV field.

From this approach, we gain a diversity of perspectives that can generate ideas, creative strategies, and solutions that the field may not have thought of otherwise, and which can be more impactful and responsive to community nuances because they are more sustainable and enjoy more community ownership and accountability. API Institute invested in building the capacity of those who are already strong in their cultural competency (through critical self-awareness, understanding social issues, and supporting clients as unique and whole persons) to be stronger and more impactful in their organizations, communities, and the DV field.

Rather than dropping in to impart some simplistic knowledge about cultures, we instead walk the journey alongside communities in a spirit of partnership, building long-term capacity of communities for them to respond effectively to DV and other social justice issues.

Lesson 3: Culturally specific DV organizations of API Institute's national stature can be in a powerful position to “run interference” and empower leaders of color from within mainstream DV organizations.

A number of the Advisory Committee members needed an outside advocate to move their organizations to recognize the value they have within their organizations and to learn ways of nurturing their leadership skills. API Institute was willing to act as this outside advocate and reach out to the organizations employing AC members, which created opportunities to have critical conversations about how the agencies were serving (or not serving) high-need, underserved Asian and Pacific Islander immigrant/refugee populations, and to help the agencies think creatively about how to increase their cultural competency by hiring API staff and investing in their professional development as community liaisons, and by forming meaningful partnerships with other local API DV agencies.

Considerations for Moving Forward

In conclusion, the Gathering Strength project represents a radical paradigm shift in how to invest in, design, and implement a long-term, social norm-shifting effort to end gender-based violence. Instead of focusing on training traditional DV providers to become culturally competent, API Institute focused on training and coaching leaders who are already culturally competent to work more effectively in fostering transformative social change in their communities. This approach helps to engage and build a critical mass of survivors who can act as “truth tellers” and advocates and bring central community leaders to the table to have difficult conversations about community accountability. For this approach to realize its full potential, the organizations and institutions that host and employ the immigrant and refugee leaders must be convinced of the value of supporting the leaders’ development and community-change efforts.

API Institute has received a Phase 2 grant from the Blue Shield of California Foundation to continue the work begun under the first Gathering Strength grant. API Institute plans to continue to engage high-need immigrant survivors, advocates, and community members in the development of responsive services and social norm change within the particular cultural and linguistic contexts of their own communities. The next phase of work will further bolster new and emerging leaders and continue to promote and document the survivor voice as a critical component of domestic violence work among immigrant/refugee communities. As this work moves forward, some critical questions for API Institute's consideration include: What kinds of ongoing strategic support for immigrant and refugee leaders are needed to continue to build critical mass and networks of support for advocates? How can these leaders/advocates best document progress and accomplishments related to changing social norms?

For interested funders, the implications are clear in terms of being open to alternatives to supporting traditional cultural competence training models. Gathering Strength offers an alternative and promising model that is strengths-based, community-focused, and aligned with the long-term vision of preventing gender-based violence in different immigrant and refugee communities. Moreover, funders need to think about the kinds of long-term, ongoing supports that are needed for culturally specific DV intermediary groups (such as Asian and Pacific Islander Institute) to continue to do this work with new groups of leaders. The partnerships and collaborations at all levels—among funders, intermediaries, community organizations, community leaders, and survivors—are key to gaining traction in building community accountability, shifting gender norms to promote gender equity, and preventing and ending gender-based violence.