



ABOUT A NATIONAL ACTION AGENDA

A National Action Agenda: Policy Recommendations to Empower South Asian Communities in the United States (2008) sets forth issues affecting the South Asian community and provides recommendations for policymakers, community-based organizations, stakeholders, allies, media, and the general public. *A National Action Agenda* is a product of the National Coalition of South Asian Organizations (NCSO), a network of groups around the country that provide services to, organize, and advocate on behalf of South Asian communities, and individual experts and advocates in various fields.

South Asian communities are part of the fabric of American history and society. While many South Asians have achieved a level of success in the United States, our organizations are cognizant of the range of significant challenges and needs that face segments of the South Asian community. We believe that these challenges can be addressed through effective social service provision, organizing and advocacy, as well as increased resources, information sharing and collaborative efforts. By coming together as a national coalition, our organizations – which have deep and articulated commitments to promoting social justice principles, amplifying local voices and experiences, and building alliances – will engage in efforts to strengthen our work and to influence positive policy change that will empower South Asians and all individuals in the United States.

South Asians navigate the intersections of gender, race, national origin, religious affiliation, class, immigration status, and sexual orientation, often on a daily basis. For example, South Asians have faced discrimination and marginalization ranging from immigration restrictions that began in the early twentieth century and continue to today; the impact of sexism, homophobia, and class-based bias; the struggle to gain equitable treatment in the workplace and at schools; the challenges faced by elderly and young South Asians; and the effects of targeting and profiling in the wake of September 11th, to name a few. Effective policies and practices that promote racial and economic justice, gender equity, and equal opportunity are critical to all communities in the United States.

A National Action Agenda comes about as a result of our recognition that issues affecting South Asian communities must be included in policy-level discussions in order to promote social justice.

For decades, community-based and faith-based organizations, advocates, and individuals in the South Asian community have expressed a broad spectrum of concerns affecting the South Asian community. Beginning in 2004, South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT) convened a series of local dialogues and forums in various parts of the country that provided an opportunity for these conversations to continue. In 2007, SAALT coordinated a national South Asian Summit, where over 150 individuals representing over 30 community-based organizations acknowledged the need for a unified policy platform that set forth issues and recommendations for social change. SAALT subsequently facilitated a collaborative process that solicited and incorporated feedback from 23 organizations and 15 individual experts in order to develop *A National Action Agenda*.

The National Coalition of South Asian Organizations (NCSO) presents the *National Action Agenda* in order to (1) raise awareness about the needs of South Asians in the United States; (2) insert issues affecting South Asians into local, state, and national dialogues; (3) guide future policy recommendations; (4) increase public understanding of the depth and scope of our community's needs; and (5) enhance ongoing and future advocacy, organizing, and educational efforts.

While *A National Action Agenda* is not intended to be the only or definitive source of information about these issues, we offer it with the hope that it will be a meaningful contribution to the discourse, actions, and efforts of social justice movements within the United States and globally. We invite additional South Asian organizations and individuals to join us in supporting *A National Action Agenda* by completing the endorsement form or contacting SAALT at saalt@saalt.org.

ABOUT THE SOUTH ASIAN COMMUNITY

With a population of more than 2.7 million people, according to the American Community Survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2006, South Asians comprised the fastest growing Asian American community in the United States between 1990 and 2000. It is essential for policymakers, service providers, and others working with the community to understand the tremendous cultural, linguistic, and economic diversity among South Asians. The South Asian community in the United States comprises of individuals with ancestry from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. The community also includes members of the South Asian diaspora – past generations of South Asians who originally settled in many areas around the world, including the Caribbean (Guyana, Jamaica, Suriname, and Trinidad & Tobago), Africa (Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda), Canada, Europe, the Middle East, and other parts of Asia and the Pacific Islands (Fiji, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore).

The South Asian community is far from homogeneous: South Asians are diverse in terms of national origin, languages spoken, economic status, and religious affiliation. The most common languages other than English spoken by South Asians include Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. South Asians practice a variety of faiths, the most common including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism. The metropolitan areas with the largest South Asian populations include New York/New Jersey, San Francisco Bay Area, Chicago, Los Angeles, and the Washington DC metropolitan area (including suburban Maryland and Virginia). Populations of South Asians are also emerging in the Houston, Atlanta, and Seattle metropolitan areas.

South Asians are also diverse in terms immigration and socioeconomic status. The majority of South Asians who live in the United States are foreign-born, with over 75% of the population born outside of the United States. South Asians possess a range of immigration statuses including undocumented immigrants; student and worker visa holders and their dependents; legal permanent residents; and naturalized citizens. With respect to employment, many South Asians have careers in the technology and medical fields; many within the community are also employed in lower-wage jobs as cashiers, taxiworkers, and restaurant workers.



SUMMARY OF ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A National Action Agenda includes the following nine components with detailed recommendations:

Civic and Political Participation: *Ensure full and equal participation for all in the civic and political process*

- Promote naturalization and voting among South Asians
- Preserve voting rights of South Asians by eliminating voter intimidation and suppression
- Ensure limited English proficient citizens' access to the right to vote
- Ensure that votes by all eligible voters count
- Eliminate xenophobic comments against South Asians and other communities of color in political discourse
- Increase political participation and civic engagement of South Asian community members

Civil Rights and Civil Liberties: *Guarantee enforcement of strong civil rights and civil liberties laws for all*

- Expand and enforce strong anti-bias and hate crimes legislation
- Eliminate profiling based on national origin, religion, ethnicity, and perceived

immigration status

- Institute and enforce policies that prevent discrimination occurring at the workplace, places of business, and schools
- Restore constitutional rights to all detained individuals
- Engage community-based organizations serving the South Asian community on issues pertaining to civil rights and civil liberties

Data Collection: *Expand and refine data collection related to South Asians*

- Require federal and state agencies to disaggregate data among various South Asian subpopulations
- Improve data collection agencies' outreach efforts within the South Asian community
- Cease immigration enforcement raids while demographic data collection is being conducted

Economic Justice: *Promote economic justice and financial security for South Asians*

- Support the right to collect a decent living wage with benefits

- Ensure work environments are free from exploitation and provide protections for labor trafficking survivors
- Support the rights of workers who seek to organize regardless of occupation or immigration status
- Provide protections for those affected by workplace discrimination
- Cease immigration enforcement at the workplace
- Ensure access to financial education and vocational training opportunities for immigrant and limited English proficient workers
- Ensure enforcement of tenants' rights and fair housing policies
- Support affordable housing for immigrants
- Ensure access to fair and affordable credit for immigrants

Gender Equity: *Advance gender equity within the South Asian community*

- Support programs aimed to address and prevent gender-based violence within the South Asian community
- Support programs that provide linguistically accessible and culturally appropriate services for South Asian domestic violence survivors
- Support policies that protect and empower immigrant domestic violence survivors
- Support immigration policies that protect and empower dependent visa holders
- Strengthen policies aimed to prevent all forms of trafficking and provide meaningful resources to survivors
- Develop policies aimed at curbing transnational abandonment of spouses
- Increase culturally and linguistically appropriate health services for South Asian

women

- Promote programs and policies that foster the economic empowerment of South Asian women

Health Care: *Promote measures addressing the health needs of South Asians*

- Ensure the right to affordable health care for all
- Develop culturally relevant treatment strategies and research geared towards understanding diseases affecting South Asians
- Ensure availability of linguistically accessible and culturally competent medical services to all, including children, immigrants and the elderly
- Increase research and culturally appropriate resources regarding mental health services for South Asians
- Increase research and culturally appropriate resources concerning reproductive health, sexual health, and HIV/AIDS for South Asians
- Promote awareness and services related to LGBTIQ health issues

Immigrant Rights: *Promote immigrant rights and just reforms to the immigration system*

- Ensure a just and humane approach to reforming the immigration system at the federal level
- Expedite immigration application background checks related to security-related delays
- Ensure the naturalization process is accessible to all eligible immigrants
- Ensure that the immigration system promotes the reunification of families
- Support immigration policies that protect the

rights of immigrant workers

- Support immigration policies that protect and empower domestic violence survivors
- Support immigration policies that protect and empower all dependent visaholders
- Cease enforcement initiatives and national security measures that disproportionately affect immigrants and promote profiling
- Ensure that immigrants are not deported from the United States for minor violations of the law
- Cease sharing information among various law enforcement agencies for immigration purposes
- Oppose policies denying public services to non-citizens or permitting state and local law enforcement to carry out federal immigration law
- Ensure compliance of detention standards and provide alternatives to immigrant detention
- Strengthen due process protections within the immigration system
- Standardize the adjudication of asylum-related forms of relief

LGBTIQ Rights: *Protect the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, questioning, and gender non-conforming South Asians*

- Support legislation that provides the same immigration benefits to LGBTIQ individuals as to other immigrants.
- Ensure that LGBTIQ South Asians persecuted due to their sexual orientation are able to obtain asylum relief
- Eliminate immigration restrictions against HIV-positive immigrants
- Investigate and prevent harassment by immigration officials of LGTBIQ and HIV-

positive immigrants

- Expand anti-discrimination and hate crimes policies to cover LGBTIQ individuals
- Support the right to civil marriage, domestic partner benefits, and recognition of self-defined families
- Promote awareness and services related to LGBTIQ health issues

Youth Empowerment: *Advance the empowerment of South Asian youth*

- Ensure access to education that is cognizant of the needs of limited English proficient (LEP) students
- Ensure communication between schools and South Asian parents who are LEP and/or recent immigrants
- Ensure that classrooms are safe spaces free from discrimination and harassment
- Ensure that classrooms are safe spaces free from police presence and immigration enforcement
- Ensure access to higher education regardless of income level or immigration status



A NATIONAL ACTION AGENDA IN USE

A National Action Agenda is intended to be used by policymakers, community-based organizations, media, and community members to gain a deeper understanding about the needs of the South Asians and to take proactive measures to best meet these needs. Below are examples of how various stakeholders can use *A National Action Agenda*.

For Policymakers and Government Agencies

- As guidance on what stance or action to take on a particular policy issue that may affect the South Asian community
- As talking points and background material for gaining allies within legislatures and governmental agencies on issues affecting the South Asian community
- As recommendations on how to engage with the South Asian community when developing policies affecting the South Asian community
- As a resource on organizations that serve the South Asian community locally and throughout the country

For Community-Based Organizations Serving the South Asian Community

- As guidance if approached to take a stance on a particular local or national policy issue that may affect the South Asian community
- As background information for speeches, media inquiries, or coalition meetings on issues affecting the South Asian community
- As talking points for meetings with local

policymakers, government agencies, coalitions, or elected officials

- As educational materials for an organization's membership, staff, board members, volunteers, or constituents

For the Media

- As background materials for articles on policies affecting the South Asian community
- As a resource on organizations that serve the South Asian community locally and throughout the country

For Community Members

- As a background information to learn more and raise awareness around issues affecting the South Asian community
- As talking points for individuals engaging in advocacy efforts with local, state, and national policymakers on issues affecting the South Asian community
- As a resource on organizations that serve the South Asian community locally and throughout the country