



Appearing before the Standing Committee on Health at the House of Commons in view of its study on the Canadian response to the outbreak of the coronavirus

Date: February 5, 2020

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to address the Standing Committee on Health regarding the response of the outbreak of the Coronavirus in Canada. My name is Kennes Lin, I am representing the Chinese Canadian National Council for Social Justice. I am also the Co-Chair of the Chinese Canadian National Council - Toronto Chapter. With me is Avvy Go, the Clinic Director of the Chinese & Southeast Asian Legal Clinic.

Since the formation of the Chinese Canadian National Council, CCNC, exactly 40 years ago, the organization has spoken out against racial discrimination against Chinese in Canada. Among other things, CCNC took the leadership role in the Campaign to Redress the Chinese Head Tax and Exclusion Act which led to a Parliamentary Apology for the Head Tax payers and their families.

Building on the legacy of CCNC, the Chinese Canadian National Council for Social Justice was launched in 2019 to educate, engage and advocate for equity and justice for all in Canada. Specifically for the Toronto Chapter that I speak from, we are currently an organization of Chinese Canadians in the City of Toronto that promotes equity, social justice, inclusive civic participation, and respect for diversity.

CCNC-SJ's mission for equity and justice has been especially important to me in the past week as Co-Chair of CCNCTO, and *personally* as a Chinese Canadian living in Toronto. Since the announcement of the hospitalization of 2 individuals with the coronavirus in Toronto, for Chinese Canadians, it did not only mean the arrival of an outbreak of fear, like all Canadians have, of catching the new virus. But this fear was immediately layered on with a pandemic of fear for being singled out, blamed for, and suspected of transmitting the virus -- all simply for being Chinese.

What makes the recent upswing of racism and xenophobia towards members of the Chinese Canadian community especially triggering, is because it invokes our collective memory of the similar mistreatment and discrimination we faced during the SARS pandemic in 2003.

"The SARS pandemic in 2003 had serious health consequences for many in Canada, with 438 suspected cases and 44 deaths. But for Chinese and Southeast

Asian communities in Canada, this was compounded by serious psychosocial and economic impact.”¹

Mainstream media constructed a media event out of SARS and fueled public fear and panic, contributing to the racialization of SARS. ² When anti-Chinese presumptions circulated, Chinese and Southeast Asians already working in precarious working conditions lost their jobs and left with no livelihood. When customers stayed away from Chinese businesses and restaurants, this led to an estimated 40 to 80 percent financial loss in Toronto’s Chinatowns. When many were assumed to be Chinese, they faced daily incidents of verbal harassment and physical violence.¹

Today, 17 years later from the SARS pandemic, I witness the unfolding of a similar “rerun” of anti-Chinese racism with the novel Coronavirus outbreak. This past week, my organization received angry phone calls, messages and emails placing blame on the Chinese community for the coronavirus pandemic. This time, however, anti-Chinese racism is fueled by the powerful and dangerous tool of social media. In the past week, A CTV journalist, Peter Akman, was fired for posting on Instagram a selfie with a Chinese hairdresser wearing a mask, stating in the caption, “Hopefully ALL I got today was a haircut. #Coronaoutbreak #Coronavirustoronto.” Still, in the past week, a video post was shared multiple times showing a customer walking into a Chinese restaurant named “Wuhan Noodle” with a caption reading, “the Wuhan virus has spread to Markham” - a city just north of Toronto with a large Chinese Canadian population.

As the World Health Organization has declared Coronavirus outbreak a global health emergency, we can only expect more racist incidents. I will now turn to Avvy Go to talk about her clinic’s involvement during the SARS outbreak and our recommendations for the Committee on how to address the rising xenophobia and racism.

My name is Avvy Go, a community member of Chinese Canadian National Council for Social Justice and the Clinic Director of the Chinese & Southeast Asian Legal Clinic. Our Clinic provides free legal services to low income members of the Chinese & Southeast Asian communities in Ontario.

During the SARS outbreak, our clinic saw first hand how racism and xenophobia affected the Chinese Canadian community. We were contacted by tenants who faced eviction simply because they were Chinese.

¹ From “The Novel Coronavirus Pandemic: Anti-Chinese Racism and the Politics of Public Health” by Edward Hon-Sing Wong, February 2020 from Briarpatch Magazine. [Upcoming Article]

² From “Yellow Peril Revisited: Impact of SARS on the Chinese and Southeast Asian Canadian Communities” by Carrienne Leung and Dr. Jian Guan, 2004 by *Chinese Canadian National Council – National Office*.

The clients that came to the legal clinic at the time also reported job losses because Chinese restaurants were laying off due to business downturn.

We also heard from many workers of Chinese descent who had been terminated or were told to stay home because of perceived fear from their non-Asian colleagues. Many of those affected were non-unionized workers. Many service workers were laid off from hotels and other service industries without termination pay or access to employment insurance benefits. In many cases, poorly enforced employment standards law, coupled with a lack of compensation, left many workers in desperate situations.

At the time, staff at the Immigration and Refugee Board insisted on wearing face masks during hearings concerning only refugee claimants of Chinese descent even though these claimants had already been in Canada for a number of years. There was even a Brampton MPP who suggested that SARS was caused by the federal immigration policy, as if the transmission of SARS to Canada can be blamed on immigrants.

Since the first confirmed case of coronavirus was reported in Canada just over a week ago, we are already witnessing the same type of stigmatization in public spaces and in workplaces. This is happening even in the legal profession where a legal clinic in Toronto is imposing a quarantine on a Chinese Canadian lawyer who is bound to return to Canada from China, even though there is no evidence that the lawyer has in any way been afflicted by the virus.

Each year in Canada, it is estimated that influenza causes approximately 12,200 hospitalizations and 3,500 deaths annually. No one has ever suggested that we should quarantine anyone and everyone who has the flu to protect public safety.

While Public Health Canada and the local public health authorities continue to work hard to stop the spread of the coronavirus, we need all levels of Government to take the leadership to stem the virus of racism. We also need the Governments to provide support to not only those who suffer physically due to the coronavirus, but those who suffer economically as a result of racism.

To that end, we call on this Committee to adopt the following recommendations to be presented to the Federal Government:

First, set up an emergency fund to assist workers to recover a share of their lost wages as a result of any Coronavirus induced job loss. The fund can be modeled upon the Wage Earners Protection Program currently reserved for employees of bankrupt businesses.

Second, establish a fund to assist small businesses hardest hit by Coronavirus.

Third, the Public Health Agency of Canada and Provincial Ministries of Health must set aside funding for public education campaigns to provide accurate and consistent information about Coronavirus with input from community organizations and in different languages other than English and French. Such information and public service announcements in different languages must also be disseminated through various social media, and first language media.

Fourth, through the Office of the National Anti-Racism Secretariat, and working with Chinese Canadian community organizations, the Canadian Government should develop a national campaign to combat racism and xenophobia arising from the Coronavirus outbreak, and to provide immediate funding to Chinese Canadian community groups working on Anti-Racism to support their work on a short term basis. Finally, the Government must build on its National Anti-Racism strategy by developing specific goals and objectives, and provide long term sustainable funding to community organizations to combat anti-Chinese racism and hate in Canada.