

Houston Asian American Archive, COVID-19 Special Collection
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interviewee: Dr. Nusrat Ameen
Interviewer: Chelsey Wen
Date of Interview: June 1st, 2020
Transcribed by: Chelsey Wen
Edited by: Kelly Liao
Audio Track Time: 1:07:28

Background:

The special oral history collection is created in response to COVID-19 that started in February 2020. Dr. Nusrat Ameen is the Senior director of Legal Services and Education at Daya, a non-profit organization that provides culturally competent support for South Asian victims of domestic violence. She discusses the effects of COVID-19 on victims of domestic violence, such as increased difficulty with child custody and government benefits. She also discusses how Daya has modified its approach to be more accessible during the pandemic through virtual meetings. Lastly, she touches on the role of Asian Americans in the Black Lives Matter movement that gained momentum after the murder of George Floyd.

Setting: The interview was conducted over a Zoom meeting on June 1st, 2020.

Key:

CW: Chelsey Wen
NA: Nusrat Ameen
—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop
...: speech trails off; pause
Italics: emphasis
(?): preceding word may not be accurate
[Brackets]: actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

Interview transcript:

CW: Okay, so today is June 1st, 2020. My name is Chelsey Wen and I'm interviewing Dr. Ameen for our special COVID-19 project. So the first question is have you engaged in any response to the pandemic?

NA: As you know, we are working in a domestic violence agency called Daya. We serve survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault. So for us it is really impacting because the social distancing is good for containing the disease, but for many survivors who are living with their abusers, it can be horrifying, you know, horrific. So, we are definitely seeing a change in our services while we are doing remotely because in these situations where there is COVID, domestic violence survivors are facing much more safety issues than in a regular situation. Our safety planning and everything around it, you know, we are trying to be very creative to do safety planning during this COVID and I'll go in detail later. Did I answer your question?

CW: Yeah, yeah. So can you talk more about how stay-at-home orders or quarantine might affect domestic violence during this time?

NA: Yes, that's a good question because— if you look at our services, —we provide counseling and we provide case management to our direct services and legal advocacy, housing etcetera. And the second service is the preventive work that we do. During the pandemic, we are being forced to work remotely because of the social distancing and we are—but we have not stopped any of our services. So if, —you know, if we break the services for the counseling, which we were doing face to face, now we are doing remotely by a telemedicine which is like HIPAA compliant and it is called Doxy.me. So it's a video call which is secured and we are doing it for a bit. The counselors are, you know, offering that to our clients. We are being able to, you know, communicate with them during the case management part. So a lot of case management are being done and within the case management, there is career counseling, there's a building to housing advocacy and legal advocacy, all of it are—are being done remotely. What we are doing to ensure that it is a, you know, the clients are not, you know, compromised. We are using code words when we are communicating with the client. So, for example, if a case manager is communicating with the client via text to know—to answer something that the client has asked previously or to make or to have, you know, do a scheduling of counseling or case management, they are using a code word to—and the client is corresponding with the code word and then we are knowing that the, you know, it is reaching to the client, the survivor. And we are—that's how we are maintaining this safety and security of the clients.

We are—with the—with the—others also we are not on, we are making sure that—the digital abuse is a very common thing, right in this era of technology. And during the COVID, we know that many of the clients who are still living with abusers, digital abuse can be really, really bad. So we are making sure that they are changing their passwords regularly, securing their phones and and thus, you know, we are maintaining it by using codes to communicate with them. We are also creatively, thinking creatively and maybe having a certain word that—that is easy for the survivor to remember. Like “olive,” or “candle,” or “rose,” something that you know she remembers, or resonates with her for, you know, reasons of her own choice and give these words to the children, to the neighbors, to the family, others to the friends, so that if they are in an extreme situation where they're not being able to call 911, if they use that word you know the children or the neighbors or the you know, anyone that she has given the code word will know to call 911.

So, you know, we are trying to learn how in the COVID, you know, this pandemic, how creative we can be to secure the survivors' safety. And we have made a video that is available in the, in our, on our website which is dayahouston.org. It is available during the COVID how to do the safety planning so that it is available for anyone and we are always using our social media to, you know, to aware people who may you know come across a friend or someone who they can share the information with because as you know statistics says that one in four, one in three women and one in seven men are victims of intimate partner violence, and you may come across someone who will be a victim. So if you're aware

you can pass on that message to others, you know, they will be able to guide or they will be able to know what to do in a certain situation. And we use the you know, three R's which is the "Recognize," "Respond," and "Refer" by which we always, you know, educate the public of how to recognize the red flags that domestic violence survivors or sexual assault survivor is going through. And once you recognize it, you—you can respond accordingly and refer. So when you hear somebody saying something, you listen empathetically and then you validate that and you say that you believe it, rather than asking what happened or why did it happen or what did you do. So that is part of our education training that we offer continuously and especially in the COVID situation, we are taking the, you know, opportunity, because now everyone is using Zoom, right? It is more accessible. You don't have to go to a particular place. It's, you know, time and transportation and everything is saved. So, now people are—from home they are being able to, you know, get these trainings through zoom.

So, we are reaching out to, you know, populations where they need to know about these three R's and they need to know about resources. They need to know that who are the, who they can call and how they can do because there is now in the media so much about domestic violence because it has increased, you know, a lot during the COVID. And the projection by the World Health Organization and others that how it's gonna go higher and like so it's—it's scary, right? I mean, all these news are really scary. And then they said, you know, or "You will not have space in the shelters," and all. But we know the alternatives. And we know that there's a lot of, you know, things happening around this—a lot of funding happening around these that it's being addressed to now, even if shelters are, you know, scarce because of the social distancing where, before the 40 people could be accommodated. Now, only 10 or 12 people because of the social distancing. They're not getting all the rooms they're, you know, spacing out. But then there are funds available, where the hotels are now coming, you know, to help. So there are hotels that they—policies that are, you know, that are helping the survivors to be placed in the hotels. There are a lot of restaurants and, you know, food banks and all they're supplying food to the restaurant, to the survivors and all that are being coordinated. So, what we are doing is- we are trying to, you know, do a lot of outreach education and as well as we ourselves are getting educated and learning best practices from all other partners around the state, around within the state and outside the state. So, we are regularly taking part on those Zoom calls, where we learn from other partnering agencies, what they are doing and also sharing our, you know, practices that we are doing.

So, you know, we are learning from each other to strengthen our work to help survivors and on the other hand, as I said that we are trying to reach to those population for example, I made a presentation to you know, in the—the—the min—the, what is it called? The ministry where you know, the Interfaith Ministry sorry, Interfaith Ministry where we are—they—they work with lots of refugee population. And as you know, refugees are themselves come from trauma, history, they have trauma history, and they come with that. And they while—while they're settling in a new community where they don't know much about the system and all. They're already traumatized, right. They're trying to learn and with this the COVID now, they're all, you know, everything is suspended. Meaning maybe they were trying to get a job, maybe they're trying to get integrated in this society. Now, everything is halted and that can actually increase

the anxiety level, right? And domestic violence is all about power and control. And there's a pattern of behavior that is manifested by the abuser to the intimate partner. And that manifestation can be exemplified in any kind of crises and COVID is one of the crisis, right? So there are researchers who shows that unemployment gives rise to homicide. So, we are being very careful when we are doing safety planning with—a lot of the clients have lost jobs. A lot of the abusers have lost job, right? And that gives anxiety that gives a much more financial control and all other you know patterns of behaviors that come into it, which, you know, increases the risk of the safety of the victim survivor. So we are being, we're being very cognizant about all of that.

And so we are reaching out to different, you know, resources where they are in touch with the abuser. So we have survivors who are in touch with us, or were calling us but there's silent survivors, there's silent victims that we need to reach out to. And through our education, we are doing that. So when I made a presentation with the Interfaith Ministry, who were—and their—one of their sections are working with the refugee population and they're big. Their volunteers and staff, they are in interaction with the refugee population, because they are going to their homes and they're supplying, you know, groceries or some other resources, etc. They're having that one on one, you know, interaction, which gives them the opportunity to talk about healthy relationship, to talk about to recognize the signs if there is a sign, and if they recognize that sign, then they can respond and they can refer, right? So we are, we did a presentation to them how to recognize those red flags, how to recognize those signs, and how would you respond and how would you refer accordingly. So, so that way, you know, we can reach out to the silent victims survivors. And likewise, I've done you know, during the school we had offering a, you know, services and trainings to, you know, like shelter, population, where there, there might be South Asian nations going there and they will be needing services and they can refer to us or any other organizations that are appropriate for them, which is culturally competent etc. We are, you know, going to different segments of the population, like last week I gave a presentation to Ismaili, you know, population, which is one of the sections in the South Asian population, religious population that they have their own safety net and they have their own staff who are doing a lot of case management with the their population, and we spoke about the three R's we spoke about the you know, the red flags and how to recognize that and how to do safety planning, etc. So that's how we are reaching out to—to our prevention program.

Also, as I said, we are, we have not stopped our direct program. We are doing the counseling remotely with Doxy.me. We are providing case management. Many of our clients, because they have lost their jobs, they are not being able to pay rent. So we are providing rental assistance. We have been successful in getting them situated in apartments through housing program. We have a federal housing program, we have our own supporting housing program. And the Federal Housing has a lot of bureaucratic rules, right? I mean, they, you have to do inspection etc, before you can place your clients. And in the beginning of COVID, it was not possible because no one were allowed to go to apartment complexes. So we have existing leasing offices that we have relationship with where we send our clients for one year RRH¹ housing where they can live for a year without paying or if they have any job then they can

¹ Editor's note: RRH refers to the Rapid Re-Housing program

pay a certain percentage. So, those are the leasing offices that we are reaching out to, you know, during COVID then trying to convince them that look here, there is a client in the shelter but no shelter does not have the space and she needs to move out and we have to avail these because RRH is also you know, very time bound, right. So they have to, if they're giving the housing, they have time within which they have—you have to place our clients. So many of the complexes are understanding that and letting us do the inspection so that we can place our clients. So all of these are happening, people are coming together because one thing at the end of the day, we all are in it together. So it is not that you can do the work isolated. You have to have, you know, partners who are—everyone is coming forward. Everyone is trying to bend their rules. Everyone is trying to help during the pandemic to—to be more cognizant about the survivors needs and be flexible. So that you know we can work together.

But we have you know, few challenges that we are facing for example, and as I said, the safety planning. We are not being able to do the one-on-one counseling because body language makes a lot of, you know, impact and when you're doing constantly that counselor, the counselor needs to do some, they have some techniques that they follow while they're doing counseling. And now they're being they're doing it remotely.

Some of course, these are challenges, but the other challenge that we are hearing from our clients is that custody, you know, the exchange when there is already an existing custody, you know, that they are abiding with the custody–custody decree. What they are doing during the COVID is the abusers are taking advantage of that. So, what they are doing is, you know, what we have heard from our clients is that they are not coming on time when they were supposed to pick up the children their own time, and or they're just, you know, just doing it arbitrarily, where whatever they—they are taking the children, they're not sending them back on time. They're not following the CDC rule. They're taking them to the parks and all—not now I mean, before that now parks have opened, but they're taking them you know, not making them wear masks and all of that, and the children are coming and telling their moms. So these are some power control things that the abusers want to use to just intimidate the survivor, right? And we cannot do anything for—in those situations because the courts are now wanting to keep the status quo. They don't want to, like, do these cases they already there is a, you know, case already closed. And they're not doing modification. They're only doing emergency cases, right. They're only doing cases where this, you know, emergency or the CPS involved or, you know, some extreme situations. Those are the ones that have been were being done and slowly the courts are now being, you know, more adaptable and doing the regular cases. But if you're, you know, modification or they will not be doing now because that's a—they want to just hold the status que. So, those are the places where our clients are also being harassed or also being, you know, controlled.

And unfortunately, you know, because of the COVID we cannot give them much of remedy, but what we are doing is we are, we are trying to, you know, through our counseling and or we are doing a lot of therapies around the coping mechanism, how to cope in these situations, how to address anxiety, how to address all these unknown that were not happening before but because of the pandemic it is happening.

So, the counselor is also, you know, keeping that and addressing those coping mechanisms and things like that. So, yes, it is a challenge in this pandemic. For more—more for the survivors who are living with them with, living with their abusers and who are not living, but you know, they are also being isolated because survivors who are—have come out of the abusive relationship and are now staying by themselves, they are also isolated not because—they are not being able to—their coping mechanisms are also being challenged because they—they would they would fall back on friends or families to, you know, to have that extra shoulder to fall on.

Now, because of the COVID, you know, they are totally isolated. So, they have to also learn the coping mechanisms of how alone they can, you know, address the situation of not having anyone else to go to or, you know, when you're feeling down, you're not being able to go to your friend or your family or even come to Daya because of—for many of our clients who don't have any family here, who have been married to the abuser and abusers family and abusers friends that have been their support system and now they are not because of the abuse and she does not or he does not have any other support system than Daya if they're not being able to come to Daya, all right, so that face to face interaction is not happening. But the counselors are you know, trying their best to make sure that they are following up with clients and encouraging them to do the remote counseling so that they can, you know, address all the issues and challenges that they're facing now.

CW: Um so you were talking about custody, and I was wondering what are other ways that quarantine has created more opportunities for abusers to take control.

NA: So, as I was saying that, you know, any doubt, it's all case to case, you know, basis. We have, some of the clients were, you know, they were already having issues of custody arrangements because the abusers are not following it, they are getting more opportunity now, because they know that the courts are not functioning totally. So they know that—and they may feel that, you know, they will not be able to go to attorneys, they will not be able to go to, you know, get the CPS involved, like as much as they would in a normal situation. So, they're taking all these to their advantage. And as I said that domestic violence is all about power and control. They are consciously using that power and control over the victims, emotions, right? So they're playing with their emotions, they're making it a point that “Okay, now she's helpless, she will not be getting any resources at the pandemic. So, you know, I can just use that power and control her emotions by not giving the child back on the time at time, what is she going to do? She's going to maybe call the police will also not come on time because of the pandemic social distancing, etc.” Because people have their concern. They don't know that definitely police will come and you know, but abusers using it because they're thinking that survivors will refrain from calling the police because they think oh the police will not come, you know, because of their thinking that “Oh, they're ignorant of the system.” So they want to take advantage of that and say, “Oh, what will you do?” Yeah, and if and if a client more so if and when the survivor's immigration is tied to their abuser, that is some extreme cases that we see where abuser's power control becomes more and more you know, because now, who will you go to? USCIS is not even working, you're not going to get your you know,

don't have the immigration, you're you're undocumented now, because maybe the abuser has not applied for the, you know, survivors immigration, maybe the, you know, or or maybe it's not renewed- many of our clients have, depend on dependent visa, for example, they are married to the green card holder or a citizen or they have come on a work visa with the H-1 they are on H-4 so abusers hold this immigration as a tool to abuse, right? So the trump card to abuse them in any normal situation with pandemic, they now know that you will not be able to get go to any—any place and you will be, you know, what you're going to do. You'll be on the street. How will you—you will not be will be able to go back to your country because there is no airlines now. There is—you cannot even go back. You will not even deport me, if you're, if you're, if you're, if you're you know held by ICE, they'll put you in detention. So you know, this is the fear factor. You know, that—that's very scary for—for survivors. When they're on the dependent visa, right.

But we are telling our—so what we are doing on our part is that the clients, we know that they are on the dependent visas, we are reaching out to them and saying that, you know, “Let's apply for your immigration. Don't, you know fall through the cracks, because it's a pandemic. It does not matter, we can still apply for your I-751 waiver, we can still apply for your visa, we can still apply, the application part is going on. So don't, you know, think you know, because if you're not in the system, you hear all the social media, and you just block your mind saying nothing is happening, right? But we are working in the system. So we know that, you know, the applications are happening, still going on. It's the interviews were, you know, were halted till June 1st week, but then other things are happening. So let's just apply.”

If—if a person's you know, renewal was supposed to happen within a certain time, we are making sure that the pandemic does not—this pandemic does not make her, you know, fall through the cracks. And she lacks that. So we're—we're being more cognizant now, and all our client services team, you know, be—through our legal clinic, we are doing data on via my(?) representative. So I'm helping with them with getting all the documents and everything ready to apply. And we have done a lot of applications already. Since March, that when we started working remotely, our immigration work is not stopped. So we are doing it and we are, you know, sending applications to the to the USCIS and USCIS also has made us a lot of rules and regulations that if your immigration, if your work authorization or your state tests(?), come, you know, it's just, you know, expired, the pandemic will not impact that, if they will, you know, still be able to renew it and things like that. So it's—you know, but the message is there, right? The message is there, which puts a fear in the minds of the victims and puts the fear in them to come forward. And we are making sure that all these messages are reached to the through our social media, to our trainings, education and outreach. So that, you know, they are encouraged to come and get our services and get services from all others who are, you know, partnering agencies and all other who are doing the work with the survivors.

CW: So has applying for government assistance and different immigration things, has that been slowed down by the pandemic, or is it—does it seem normal?

NA: It—it has slowed down for sure, a little, but, you know, many of our clients have gotten the—who have, you know, been taxpayers and all they got the stimulus package. We have them—the Client Services team help them how to apply and things that they have—many for clients who have gotten unemployment packages. And we have helped them navigate that. So it's not that, you know, you know, they're not getting everything, it's, it's the fact that many of them are not reaching out—that silent victims, those are the ones that we are trying to get in the pandemic time that they must not stop coming and reaching out to services who can help help them, right? So through our respond, recognize, respond and refer, that training we are trying to educate others and the ones who are who can reach out to that silent victim so that they come forward and they they applied all that we can help them to navigate the system and because there is a lot of you know, there has been created the CARES Act and the HEROES Act and all of that they're applied—like tenant, you know, in the landlord tenant a lot of our, you know, the lot it generally and also to survivors, when they're not being able to pay rent, whether they can be evicted. So there is a rule for eviction. And so we are encouraging clients to come in so they know about it and how to get help and we are connecting, connecting them to legal aid agencies who are actually helping with that eviction notices and they're helping with all of that.

So yes, it is scary. There are a lot of things that, you know, impacting because of the COVID, but, you know, everything that is coming, there's also some remedies there or some, you know, Acts, the laws are there. There are, you know are other, you know, situations with those can be addressed, that we are being very cognizant to, to let the survivors know and let others know like you or me or someone who maybe come across coming across to any survivors that we can say that this is where you should be going.

CW: Um what kind of help would you like to see from the government and other organizations during this crisis?

NA: So—so there are lots of agencies who are doing a lot of advocacies. We are part of those, like for example, locally, we are a part of the coalition called HCDVCC, Houston, you know, coordination department for domestic violence. We are partnering with the HILSC, which is the legal aid, Houston legal services coalition. We are also part of, you know, TCFV which is, Texas Council on Family Violence. All of us are doing advocacy for survivors' rights. And, you know, so there has been a lot of policy level push by which, you know, the CARES Act actually came out at the, HEROES Act actually came out where government is actually found for giving a lot of subsidies and a lot of, you know, funds for through the HEROES act that came which did not address much of the survivors in the CARES Act. And the 148 million was—is granted to the family violence prevention services, right? 200 billion for essential employees assisting the survivors and, and to the COVID testing and all that was also insured to the HEROES act. And then temporary extend immigration status including the I-765, which is the you know, employment authorization, which—which is expiring soon, but because of the COVID could not. Those are being you know, implemented to the HEROES act and additional hundred thousand through

the VAWA² grant and 1 billion for housing voucher and legal services, because there's a lot of legal services that need, you know, that fund because of the COVID. Housing is—housing voucher is very important for our clients, because domestic violence is closely related to homelessness, right? If—if survivor—if a victim survivor has, you know, housing insured, only then that step can be taken to get out of that abusive home because that's addressing the homelessness. So housing voucher is very important for our clients. And we have seen in the HEROES act that a lot of more house—1 billion housing vouchers are being given to avoid that survivors—victims should be stuck in the home. So now they can, they have these vouchers, you know, the agencies can be dispersed and be you know, they can, they can take that whole decision, which is very important. And we know that it takes the, research states that it takes more than seven times before a survivor actually takes that step and come out, right. And because when in any kind of crisis and like the COVID situation, if they have the means to get the vouchers of housing, it will make them to take the decision to get out of that relationship. And you know that domestic violence is a cycle of abuse. It happens, it's like a cycle and impacts everyone in it's a public concern. It impacts everyone in the family, impacts the children and everyone else. So to break that cycle, it is very important that they take the step and if they know that they have the services available out there that will help them to empower them and to be independent, then they can only make—take that step. So government is also realizing that and government is also to the federal fund to the state funding and getting all these and we are being able to help clients with the rental and the housing vouchers. Hopefully we'll see more because of this new HEROES act, that we want to get more, you know, help that we can, you know, offer to our survivors.

CW: Um, do you think things like unemployment benefits and stimulus checks are empowering for survivors to get or do you think it's another opportunity for financial abuse from abusers?

NA: Yeah that's a great question, so, you know, it's mixed. It has two answers. One is like, the clients who are not with the abusers, for them it is very empowering, right? I was just speaking to a client prior to the, prior to this call, and she received her green card after three years, three years of battle all through VAWA, Violence against Women Act, and she she was telling me that she got the stimulus package and so she was very happy that she got the stimulus package because she had filed that 2019 tax, 2018 and 2019 tax independently, right?

So it came to her, but, you know, clients who are with the abusers, victim survivors who are still with the abusers and the abusers, you know, use different techniques, patterns, and one of them that you mentioned is financial abuse, right? Financial control. So they are the abusers actually, if they have applied jointly, they are get—they are the one and they get, you know, the tax returns. Most of the cases that we see is clients, they—they get the check or they get the tax benefit to their own account. They don't share with the survivors even if they have, you know, very few of them have joint accounts or with the where the checks are deposited.

² Editor's note: VAWA refers to the Violence Against Women Act

So I think now, and I'm not sure about this, I'm not going to—I don't want to quote something that is not correct, but government is actually looking into it. That the next year will be, how the survi—how they can be—how these financial aids can—how—how creatively can go to the survivors and how it can, you know, how that can be done. So—so that that is a very good question and we are we are also trying to find out how we can address that and have the survivors, you know, receive the packages that the government is actually, you know, some of the, you know, clients who are going through a case right now, we are addressing it through—through our attorneys that, you know, they should be getting their, you know, their shares. And if they have the attorney and the case is going on, for example, they have the worst case is going and the custody and the property rights are being at risk, and at this point of these things happened, then it is easier for them to get it, right? Because they already have an attorney, and the attorney can address that, but the ones who are still trying to take that step or trying to make that decision to come out and they don't have the the attorney or anything, they're trying to negotiate, they're trying to see okay, you know, that I know that this has come, you know, individuals got 1200, and so I, you know, you should be giving it to me, and so even to have that power to speak, is also something that comes with empowerment, right? Because it might trigger the abuser and while it's trying to do this financial control, so we are very cautiously addressing those with our clients and hopefully—hopefully those can be addressed in a better way, if you know, and they can get the checks separately because there are a lot of other undocumented ones also, right? Who—they don't have a bank account yet, how they are going to get the benefits actually because the abusers—maybe green card holder or citizen or H1 but they are dependent and maybe they are on a conditional green card and now that the abusers have not applied for the removal, they have become undocumented, right? And now they are helping them through the VAWA or through, you know, I-751 waiver and so how they can get those benefits.

CW: Um so does Daya have plans currently on how to transition back to in-person meetings?

NA: So we—until 15th of June we are working remotely and on 15th of June, before 15th of June we will be reassessing and see what all other nonprofits are doing, and we will be following what others are doing and we have the intention of opening the office in phases, maybe you know not all of us will go, and it will be phase A, phase B like, you know, how government has given the CDC and all they're for giving all those guidelines, so we will be following all the guidelines, and we will see that how we can, you know, start operating in person. But again, you know, we all know that there is a fear that in the fall it's gonna come back again, so we don't want to also, you know, have our staff exposed to it and then they get sick or our clients, you know. So we are very—we have it in mind and we are going to reassess it, middle of June, to see whether we can go or whether we can go, you know, continue our remote work. Because by remote work, we haven't suspended any of our services. And, you know, if you look at the statistic, if you look at the reports, we are actually doing, you know, quite a phenomenal work, working remotely, so it hasn't impacted any—any of our services, but of course, you know, face to face counseling and all benefits, definitely benefits more than remote but there's no statistics now, right?

I mean maybe after a year you can see how it impacted, comparing it with the, you know, the face to face and the remote, now we don't have any data to say whether it is not working or working. What we are seeing on the surface is that it is working because clients are taking the services, they are taking the Doxy.me. In fact many of them are saying that now they are being able to do it in a more flexible manner because, you know, many of the clients—the, you know, the abusers stalk them. They—they say “Oh, where are you going out? Why are you going out? When did you go?” etcetera, etcetera. So then we have to do “Oh, tell them that you are going to the library or tell them that you are going to the grocery” or things like that and then, you know, “Turn off your GPS.” Now they are being able to stay home and—and do it in their, in their own flexible time when the maybe the abuser has gone out for work or the abuser has gone off for the grocery or something. You know, they know that this time they can use it, right? This time, to communicate with the counselor or the case manager and, you know, do it in their flexible time without thinking about transportation, without thinking of abuser stalking them, etc, so actually the remote work is helping many of our clients.

CW: So do you predict that Daya will continue to do remote work and stuff in the future?

NA: So that's a great question. Actually we were discussing this about remote work and satellite work and all of that. Actually Rice MBA program, they did a strategic planning for us and we were—this past Friday and Saturday—both days, we were discussing about our five year plan based on that strategic planning that, you know, Rice MBA students have done for our Daya. And the concept of working remotely came. So now, you know, many of us who are working in this new normal, for many of us it is working, right? So we—as being a senior director and being an admin, with the ED and the decision making stuff, we are actually thinking that, how we can retain most staff, maybe staff who are—live in a, you know have a longer commute and they get burnt out because of the commute but they are very essential for the, for the company. We maybe, we will, you know, rethink and maybe instead of five days, we will be rotating our staff and saying okay, you can work one day from home or you can work because now we are seeing that this works, right?

So if remote working is being benefited, beneficial and it is not impacting, then maybe when everything is normal and hopefully everything will be normal in a few months time or when the vaccine is there and we all go back to our work. I—I personally think many of the organizations, not only nonprofit but other profit organizations also, they will also start thinking working remotely, you know, in phases, right? Like maybe you know staff can rotate and working remotely for one or two days from home, that will actually not only help the, you know, the person, individual person, but it will also help the environment, it will also help so many things. Right now you can see the clear sky. You know, if you go out, you can, you can feel that, you know, you can breathe better than before, right? So it is—everything is connected so maybe this was something that was put on us forcefully, we didn't have a choice, but people have creatively started working in a way that we are more connected and we are doing this work remotely without, you know--- of course, everything has challenge, challenges, every kind of work will have challenge. But now, this has become the new normal, right? For—for everyone, so yes that's a question

that we will also be considering, maybe in phases or maybe, you know, and see, as a pilot project to see how it works even when we go back to the normal.

CW: So are you optimistic about the future?

NA: I am, I am a person, you know, who always think positive. Positivity is my strength and I have given my, you know, my view to your, you know, archive before also as a survivor. I've always thought in a positive way, so that is very important. So yes, I am always optimistic and I—because of my optimism, I start thinking of how, in any given situation you can creatively work and address challenges. So hopefully, you know, now that we have learned a lot of practices and everything from others, we have started creatively working. In this situation, you know, we—we, I'm optimistic that one day, you know, you know, we will overcome the COVID, we will have a vaccine, we will have, you know, it will be just like flu vaccine that you're—you know, and then you also have to, you know, be positive, think positive, that otherwise you will not be able to function, right? If you're thinking “Oh nothing has happened, that the world is coming to an end,” you will be, you will not get the energy to even work, you will not be—you will go into depression, you, everything will fall apart.

So you have to think positive you have to think that there is a light at the end of the tunnel, and this is something that we are being forced to, you know, work, you know, you know, we have been forced into this situation but hopefully one day we will get out of it. And we will be able to, you know, be, you know, work in a normal way. Just like if you think about the Spanish flu that happened, 1900, two or something like 1900s. 50 million people died I think, I mean so many, I mean more than what have died now had—and the world population was so less at that time, but people overcame that, right? And people, you know, survived and everything, and we will survive this pandemic and we will be stronger I think for what we have learned from this. Of course there's a lot of tragedies a lot of people lost, you know, their near and dear ones, including me, we have—within our family we have lost due to COVID, relatives and friends, but, you know, we have to go on, we have to, we have to be positive. We have to—I am a person that, you know, always practice that, preach that you have to think positive.

CW: Um so shifting a little bit to talk about the Black Lives Matter movement in light of recent events with the murder of George Floyd, what role do you think Asian Americans have in this movement and what role do you hope to see them take in the future?

NA: So for Asian Americans I think, not only, unfortunately, some unfortunate incident about George Floyd, but in any—any situations Asian Americans are always lagging behind, right? Like we are working on census, we are working on voters' rights. Asian Americans are always the one we are struggling with and we are, you know, we are trying to get them to vote. We are trying to make sure they are in the census because census matters, all the funding and everything is on, you know, depends on the data from the census. So you have to be very, you know, we have to have that active role to play and if we think that “Oh what will it matter if we don't vote, my one vote will not matter?” Yes it matters,

right? So if you think of activism, if you think of, you know, situations like this, Black Life Matters, for me, all life matters, be it black, be it, you know, Asians, be it white, any life matters, right?

And with this George Floyd what I'm seeing recently is that everyone is coming together, worldwide, we are as an organization part of national organizations who do a lot of lobbying and who do a lot of activism, political activism that we have a limited scope to do as a non-profit, as a 501c, so we are a part of those, and we are a part of those platforms so we are making sure that, you know, as Asian Americans or as South Asian Americans we should be in that movement and address that. So we are doing all—actively engaging on all the signatories and all the, you know, making sure that we are there, our voices are united and that we are putting it on the social media, making sure that we are doing everything that the partner organizations are doing. We are encouraging the partner organizations and everyone to come into the movement and making sure that we address it. Because it is not only black life matters, it is all life matters and this has been happening for, you know, you know, so many, you know, historically it has been happening. And it has to stop and it has to stop and we cannot just ignore and we have to all come together and make sure it is, it is not only their you know it is not only a black thing but it is everyone's. All of our, that we should be voicing that, you know, every life matters, and black life matters, definitely, should not be ignored.

So yes, we are addressing that, in an organization level, in an independent, individual level. My son who is a who is in college and teenager you know and I've always been very vocal in talking about human rights and humanitarian rights and you know. So he's, you know, 19 and just completed his first year in college, unfortunately the last few months that he was so looking forward to enjoying, with the COVID he had to do online and study online and his exam. He's, he's very vocal on this and is participating in, you know, all the protests and all, and I'm encouraging him to do that. So yes, youths are also coming and, you know, being vocal on this, and I'm seeing it on a personal level as well as a professional level that it is coming.

But I think and what I would like to see is more participation of Asian Americans, in this type of movements and any kind of movement whether it's census, whether it's voter rights, Asian Americans lag behind, but we have to be more into the movement and it is high time as Asian American, Asian Americans we have to be in these movements and we have to take part more in, you know, you know, in our rights to establish our rights to to voice our rights, to be more vocal.

CW: Do you think there's a reason that Asian Americans have been more complacent or less active in these areas?

NA: I have not done much research on that but I would say that it is something cultural, you know, we always don't want to get involved in stuff, we—we think our voice does not matter. Because historically we have come from cultures of oppression and, you know, and we will think that it—it is more about ignorance and the culture and that we feel very conditioned to the culture that we are from, we feel very conditioned that, you know, our voice did not matter but this is something that has to be broken, right?

Houston Asian American Archive, COVID-19 Special Collection
Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

That cycle has to be broken and only your generation can do it, my son's generation can do it. I am from, you know, generation that have seen all these things, but I'm trying to break that cycle. But I am maybe the exception that falls in that exception group, not general group. But my son's, you know, generation your generation are the ones who are going to break that cycle and be more vocal and be more in—in at par with all the movements that everyone's taking part.

CW: Um, I think that's most of the questions I have. Do you have anything else you want to say about Daya during this time or anything?

NA: No I think, first of all, I—I definitely thank you for having me, [**CW:** Mhm] you know, to state my opinion. It is very important for your archives because there will be researchers who are going to avail these, you know, these platforms to do their research, future researches and all, to see how, you know, organizations like Daya which is totally culturally based and linguistically, you know, appropriate agency helping survivors from a certain, you know, region, South Asian. Although we take all our clients, any clients who come to us that we speak the language, we definitely help. But to know that this this kind of organizations exist who are reaching out beyond the, you know, the South Asian population to everyone, beyond the greater Houston, nationally, because we have these organizations all over the States and the domestic violence organizations. We partner with all of them, so we always use these best practices. We are on the policy level team, we try to shift the policy. This nationally there's a coalition called National Coalition of South Asian Organizations, NCSO, and we are a part of that and we try to, you know, influence the policy. And what we see, so it is always important to have our voices on the tables. It is, you know, if the South Asian need to be on the table, so we are that level of organization, we need to be at the table so we can say, these are our problems, that needs to be addressed, right? So Daya, you know, is on the table, nationally, and Daya is on the table locally and, you know, the HILSC, HCDVCC, and you know, TCFV you know, it is a policy table, I am in, you know, where we are to trying to legislate, 87th legislation that will happen next May. We are trying to see what are the gaps what are the things that hurting the survivors and we are trying to promote that and we are trying to see if we can take it to the legislation, to the legislature to legislate, right? So we are on the policy tables we are voicing our needs, and that is very important for researchers and you know any Asian American who is going to listen to your archives and listen to your, you know, go to your website. And it is very important to know that this type of work is going on and—and any way that we can help we are there to help in the future researches.

CW: Great, okay I will stop recording.

[Interview ends.]