

## ***I Am Shared Safety*** Thoai Nguyen, CEO, SEAMAAC (Southeast Asian Mutual Assistance Association Coalition)



When [SEAMAAC](#) set out to build a program to support people experiencing domestic violence in Philadelphia’s immigrant and refugee communities, the organization “found that *domestic violence*, that term, didn’t really jive well with people,” says CEO Thoai Nguyen. “As a culture, at SEAMAAC, there’s a lot of nuance around the impact of domestic violence on those we serve, but there is an understanding that we want families to be *safe families*.”

Stephanie Levin, co-chair of Shared Safety’s communications sub-committee, recently spoke with Thoai about the challenges SEAMAAC has experienced in its work with clients who have encountered domestic violence (DV) and how the organization has addressed those challenges, including how its [Safe Families](#) program was developed.

**SL: When you became CEO of SEAMAAC in 2005, what challenges existed in addressing DV in Asian American and Asian/Pacific Islander (API) immigrant and refugee communities?**

**TN:** DV has always been an issue in highly stressful situations in which whole families are being displaced from one country and resettled to another one 10,000 miles away. For some immigrants and refugees, domestic violence is culturally acceptable. There are issues of confidentiality and with HIPAA, and, historically, no one wanted to acknowledge the problem of DV in the community. Because the subject was so taboo—it was considered a family issue and no one’s business—women, children, and some men suffered in silence. That hinders how people access services; that’s one hurdle. Another is that the staff who are from those communities, who are familiar with the language and culture of the people they serve, are often stuck in that taboo mentality; that’s a big problem too.

Before the early 2000’s, people weren’t ready to talk openly about these issues, but we did work to support women and families and help them access services through other organizations in the city.

**SL: When—and how—was Safe Families developed?**

**TN:** Around 2009, when Christa Loffelman and Amy Jones, both passionate advocates of DV work, joined our staff, that’s when we seriously started talking about how to create a formal program. We reached out to Women Against Abuse, WOAR: Philadelphia Center Against Sexual Violence, and Lutheran Settlement House, and they helped us navigate the DV world of funding and training. They trained us, but I think there was a mutual benefit—we helped them understand the communities we serve so they could also serve them with sensitivity and care.

During this period, we also held more than 12 DV focus groups, covering diverse API languages, gender, and age groups, to understand and inform how we would build a responsive program for DV. The results of the focus groups helped us build a roadmap for a high quality and culturally responsive program for immigrants and refugees.

Around 2011, we received small, but crucial funding from the Valentine Foundation. We were able to cobble enough funding to train and certify staff. Around 2013, federal funding allowed us to hire staff and create a more robust program.

**SL: How do clients become part of SEAMAAC's Safe Families program?**

**TN:** Some of these ethnic communities are very small, so word travels fast. If someone in a community is arrested on domestic violence charges, the whole community knows. They might not speak openly about it, but they know that SEAMAAC was called in to provide services and help. They might, then, keep us in mind if they need help in the future—or if a friend or community member is experiencing DV.

**SL: How are services in the Safe Families program unique from other programs?**

**TN:** We are different because of the communities we serve. We try to be as forthright as possible about the goals of our program, but our outreach is subtle. When we were just starting out, people experiencing domestic violence were feeling us out, but we really worked with survivors; I think of this work as a path for people to grow from the role of victim to survivor, to witness to advocate and organizer.

We have a number of former clients who become witnesses—witness is not a passive role. These clients are realizing that their experience is not just personal to them, that sometimes it's endemic in our society. We try to train and involve them, and they become advocates. Sometimes they will speak at our trainings or outreach; sometimes they will support another woman or family within their ethnic or linguistic community. They speak positively about what their experience was like going through the process at SEAMAAC.

**SL: How do partnerships impact SEAMAAC's work related to DV?**

**TN:** We all want people to feel safe in their homes. Without our partners, including the Shared Safety network, we wouldn't be able to share resources. We also have national technical assistance partners such as the Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence (API-GBV), who has helped us grow and be more connected to the national network of DV providers. As a small nonprofit, without partnerships, we couldn't reach as many people and as many communities in need, in culturally appropriate ways.

**SL: What are some changes you hope to see in systems' responses to DV for immigrants?**

**TN:** What is most crucial is a commitment of funding and political will. SEAMAAC is able to address some issues that are arising out of DV for the current immigrants and refugees, but we don't know where the next group of refugees will come from. We don't know what language they'll speak. Our program has to hire and train new staff when different groups need to be resettled in South Philadelphia. I would like to see funding that is consistent and perpetual. City employees, organizations, and police have to be trained on how to deal with DV in a culturally appropriate way. Once we had DV as a priority in our strategic plan, we pursued it and did it on a shoestring budget initially. I would think the city can do the same or better. Part of the mission of some of the larger organizations committed to DV response is to make sure that culturally and linguistically isolated communities are supported in those organizations' mission

as well; if not directly, they should be working with organizations like SEAMAAC and other culturally specific organizations to really address the issues.

**SL: What do you enjoy doing when you're not working?**

**TN:** I love being a dad to my son; he really helps keep me grounded. His mother and I have taught him that kindness is a strength, not a weakness. He's such an advocate—it's really rewarding.

And, I'm a soccer nut! I don't play as much as I used to, but that's my passion.



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