

**Moving Forward with Integrity:  
Asian Women's Shelter's Organizational Transition from a  
Founding Executive Director**

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## Acknowledgements

The data for this report was collected during a time when Asian Women's Shelter (AWS) was just beginning a period marked by a well-deserved and long-awaited breath of relief from a period of organizational turmoil. This report hopefully brings some sense of collective closure to a period of strain and hard-learned lessons and opens what we wish to be a long and durable period of stability, growth and organizational health.

I want to thank the entire extended family representing AWS including the first group of women conceiving of the vision of a space for safety, integrity and liberation for Asian immigrant and refugee women and their families back in the early 1980s; the Founding Sisters who offered their faith and dollars towards the establishment of the shelter; Beckie Masaki and Mayseng Saetern who were the first staff to welcome women and children when AWS first opened its doors in October 1988; the following stream of dedicated staff, board, volunteers and multilingual advocates who developed and crafted what we now know as AWS; and the many, many community supporters, policymakers and funders who have stood steadfastly by the vision and reality of AWS. I am fortunate to be among those who made my own organizational home at AWS when I was a staff member for ten years between 1991 and 2001 working as Assistant to the Director and later as Project Coordinator of the Multilingual Access Model.

Special thanks goes to the women who participated as interviewees in this project. This includes current and former staff members: Mouna Benmoussa, Connie Chung, Ganga Dharmappa, Mie Fukuda, Stelet Kim, Elizabeth Kirton, Beckie Masaki, Orchid Pusey, Kit Quan, Mayseng Saetern, Jee Suthamwanthanee, Anna Szeto, Nobu Tomita, Tu-Minh Trinh, Hediana Utarti; current and former board members: Anna dos Ramos, Yuri Futamura, Jennifer Gee, Kirn Gill, Ivy Lee, Ivonne Tat; and longtime AWS collaborative partners: Dean Ito Taylor, Founding Director of Asian Pacific Islander Legal Outreach (APILO) and Beverly Upton, Executive Director of San Francisco Domestic Violence Consortium & Partners Ending Domestic Abuse.

Most of all, I want to thank the multitudes of battered women who found the courage to move forward and take the risk to create new lives for themselves and their families – lives free from violence, lives honoring the full humanity of women and children, lives dedicated to a new vision of community health, safety and freedom. The hundreds, perhaps thousands, who have called the crisis line, heard a message that their experience of domestic violence or sexual assault has a name, learned about help from family and friends, stayed in abusive relationships buoyed by the sense that violence is not their fault, and became residents and “graduates” of AWS, breathe life into this report.

While I did not interview these women and children who form the foundation of what AWS represents, many of the staff, board and stakeholders that I interviewed are personal survivors of and witnesses to violence. I remind all of us that it is the experiences of the women, children, transgender people and men who suffer from violence and on whose behalf organizations like AWS exist that must be the true test of organizational health and integrity.

Mimi E. Kim

### *About the Author*

Mimi E. Kim is a long-time advocate and activist in the anti-violence movement. She worked at Asian Women's Shelter from 1991 to 2001 as Assistant to the Director and Project Coordinator of the Multilingual Access Model. She also co-founded two Korean domestic violence programs, Korean American Women In Need (KAN-WIN) in Chicago and Shimtuh in Oakland.

Mimi has been long involved in national efforts to strengthen violence intervention and prevention strategies relevant to communities of color including her participation as co-founder of Incite! Women of Color against Violence and continued work as a National Advisory Committee member of the Asian & Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence (APIIDV). Through her work with APIIDV, she published two reports, *The Community Engagement Continuum: Outreach, Mobilization, Organizing, and Accountability to Address Violence Against Women in the Asian and Pacific Islander Communities* (2002) and *Innovative Strategies to Address Domestic Violence in Asian and Pacific Islander Communities: Examining Themes, Models and Interventions* (2005).

In 2004, Mimi founded Creative Interventions, a national organization promoting alternative community-based approaches to violence intervention which published a toolkit called *The Creative Interventions Toolkit: A Practical Guide to Stop Interpersonal Violence* available on the website: [www.creative-interventions.org](http://www.creative-interventions.org).

# ***Moving forward with Integrity: Asian Women's Shelter's Organizational Transition from a Founding Executive Director***

## **Executive Summary**

### **Brief Background**

Asian Women's Shelter (AWS) first opened its doors in San Francisco in October 1988. At that time, it was among a handful of new Asian immigrant organizations dedicated to the issue of domestic violence, sexual assault and other issues of gender-based violence in the U.S. It is now among close to 100 Asian and Pacific Islander programs<sup>1</sup> addressing domestic violence and sexual assault across the country.

In August 2008, the Founding Director, Beckie Masaki, who led AWS from its first conception in the early 1980s to its opening in 1988 followed by another 22 years at its helm, made an internal announcement that she was leaving the organization. While her official public announcement did not come until six months later, she worked together with the staff and board and a group of outside consultants to ensure a smooth transition from Founding Director to new Executive Director leadership. Together with *Blue Shield of California Foundation*, *Blue Shield against Violence Program*, AWS decided to document this transition in order to serve as a useful case study for so many other organizations facing similar changes.

The transition, which extended more than three years beyond what was originally anticipated for what is now a period of five years, exemplifies many of the challenges non-profits experience today as well as reflecting the particular conditions unique to AWS. At the time that this report was written, AWS had just hired a third Executive Director from the ranks of its internal staff and now appears to be enjoying a period of organizational stability and health.

### **AWS and Commitment to Social Justice**

When I came into AWS, I never heard the word "non-hierarchy." And people not only expressed it to me, but *showed* it to me. I immediately fell in love with it. I came to AWS because I wanted to be working with survivors of violence. Then I thought, "Wow, the whole of me is welcome here." I don't have to speak better English or hide my accent. I can cook with fish sauce and long-grained rice. – Current AWS staff member

One hallmark of AWS has been its vision of social justice and social change that guides its work to address and end gender-based violence and to promote equality across class, education, race, ethnicity, immigration status and religion; access and equality to people with mental and physical disabilities; and the equality of and participation by lesbian-gay-bisexual and gender non-conforming/transgender people.

AWS is also a place of work. AWS's organizational commitment to *non-hierarchy*, *shared leadership*, and *consensus decision-making* reflects its determination to match its internal work

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<sup>1</sup> From Asian & Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence (APIIDV). *Directory of programs serving API, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders*. Retrieved from <http://www.apiidv.org/resources/programs-serving-apis.php>.

culture to its mission and values. While these values characterize what has become known as *AWS culture*, they also proved to both guide and challenge the organization as it struggled through the search for and integration of a new Executive Director. This report documents AWS's experience in adjusting a twenty year model of *non-hierarchy, shared leadership, and consensus decision-making* to the reality of the dominant model of Executive Director leadership in an era characterized by Executive Director scarcity.

### Transition Timeline Summary

The original Executive Director transition was planned and implemented as a *three-stream* process including: 1) *Executive Director transition* centered on the recruitment and hire of a new Executive Director; 2) *Organizational Transition* that included the strengthening of AWS's work team structure and the development of leadership skills-building throughout AWS's staff; and 3) *Financial Transition* focused on a successful \$400,000 fund development campaign.

The original transition timeline was planned as 7 stages.

**Table 1. Original Transition Plan: 7 Stages of Transition**

Stage	Months	Primary Activities
1	1-3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Establish and launch <i>Transition Team I</i></li> <li>▪ Clarify transition plan</li> </ul>
2	4-6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Clarify and develop Executive Director job description</li> <li>▪ Identify and strengthen staff leadership through system of team leaders</li> <li>▪ Create and begin to implement fund development campaign</li> </ul>
3	6-8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Publicly announce Executive Director transition</li> <li>▪ Recruit new Executive Director</li> <li>▪ Implement skills building for team leaders</li> </ul>
4	8-13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Interview applicants</li> <li>▪ Bring fund development campaign to a close, raising a net goal of \$400,000</li> </ul>
5	13-14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Final interviews and decision-making</li> <li>▪ Hire Executive Director</li> </ul>
6	14-18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Bring new Executive Director on Board</li> <li>▪ Orient and integrate new Executive Director with <i>Transition Team II</i></li> <li>▪ Founding Director departs</li> </ul>
7	18-26	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Complete Executive Director transition</li> </ul>

The actual timeline took three additional years as AWS failed to find a successor to the Founding Director until the hiring of the current Executive Director in May 2013.

### Findings

The report is based upon interviews with 23 current and former staff, board and 2 outside stakeholders. Report findings include:

- *Filling in Big Shoes.* Everyone recognized that finding a successor to Founding Director, Beckie Masaki, would not be an easy task. Few realized the size of the gap between the perceived scope of work and the actual breadth and depth of tasks she performed in a given

week, often filling a 3.5 FTE job position with an 80 to 100 hour work week. The expanse of her work tasks and hours were often concealed by her humble and covert leadership style. The consequences not only included larger-than-life expectations for a new Executive Director but also the development of an AWS culture valuing *non-hierarchy*, *shared leadership* and *consensus decision-making* without full recognition of the extent to which the Founding Director performed unique tasks and exercised executive decision-making powers.

- *An Excellent Process Does Not Equal and Excellent Outcome.* A thoughtful 16 month Executive Director transition process contributed to organizational optimism and full staff and board participation, but AWS also failed to adequately account for the possibility that an appropriate Executive Director may not be secured within that time frame. The lack of contingency plans resulted in outcomes that did not necessarily reflect the quality of planning and preparation by the organization.

- *AWS Culture: Myth or Fact.* The recognition of the extent to which the Founding Director exercised leadership at AWS led to questions regarding the true nature of AWS's deeply held tenets: *non-hierarchy*, *shared leadership* and *consensus decision-making*. AWS staff's tenacious hold on these values throughout the transition stood in contrast to the significant traces of skepticism among some of the board.

- *A Shelter Divided: Internal Conflict and Collective Fatigue.* As with many organizations undergoing transition from a Founding Director, AWS's journey was long and stormy. The sheer volume of work among both staff and board in terms of: 1) transition planning and implementation; 2) carrying out day-to-day operations while in the midst of transition; 3) filling in the big shoes of a Founding Director as that person is increasingly occupied with the tasks of transition and when that person finally leaves the organization; and 4) managing the conflicts and tensions that invariably accompany such a major event, were enormous. Conflicts fell primarily along the lines of staff and board.

- *External Factors: The Cascading Impact of Organizational Distress.* For AWS, the protracted struggle to find a successor to the Founding Director took place in an era of increased attention to accountability and this nation's worst financial disaster in recent history. The appearance of organizational instability led to a sudden rash of audits unprecedented in the lifetime of the organization. Funders also threatened to and actually did end sources of funding upon which AWS had relied for years. These external demands took up enormous amounts of time and emotional energy particularly on the administrative and financial staff, already burdened with the workload of transition.

- *Weathering the Storm: Resilience in the Face of Crisis.* Ironically, the failure to secure a stable Executive Director eventually forced the existing staff to step up its leadership. The staff's reliance upon each other and its commitment to the tenets of *non-hierarchy*, *shared leadership* and *consensus decision-making*, even when the reality veered far from the idea, held the organization through years of stormy weather. Without the leadership of an Executive Director, the staff had to make do and share information in a way that strengthened the model of shared leadership. Administrative, fund development and finance staff increasingly made transparent the information that had previously been held tight within that organizational component.

## Lessons Learned

*Lesson 1.* Provide ample time, energy and resources for planning and implementing a successful Executive Director transition.

*Lesson 2.* Transition failure does not necessarily indicate organizational dysfunction.

*Lesson 3.* Create the conditions for life-size Executive Director leadership.

*Lesson 4.* The ideals of *non-hierarchy, shared leadership, consensus decision-making* and *anti-oppression* are difficult but possible to sustain over time.

*Lesson 5.* The ideals of *non-hierarchy, shared leadership, consensus decision-making* and *anti-oppression* can align with executive leadership.

*Lesson 6.* Active and meaningful staff-board relationships are critical to governance.

*Lesson 7.* Make contingency plans.

*Lesson 8.* A solid, transparent and progressive evaluation plan and process for new Executive Directors, involving both board and staff, are essential to a successful transition.

*Lesson 9.* Consider interim directors in the transition from a Founding Director.

*Lesson 10.* Create a succession plan.

## Conclusion

In May 2013, AWS finally hired an Executive Director, an internal hire, who received the full support of every member of the staff and board. Through every step of the way, AWS maintained its crisis line, shelter services to survivors of violence, community-building tasks, volunteer program, the Multilingual Access Model program, the Queer Asian Women and Transgender Support program, national peer-to-peer Technical Assistance initiative and anti-trafficking work. AWS remained a trusted and valued collaborative partner and a national leader.

Through the inevitabilities of staff-board conflict, internal staff divisions and distressing demands from external stakeholders, AWS managed to persevere through years of crisis – exhausted but whole. AWS held tight to its tenets of *non-hierarchy, shared leadership, consensus decision-making* and *anti-oppression*. Now with a new Executive Director to complete the staff roster, it can loosen its grip and re-shape and re-define these values to fit an organization with reasonable work expectations, systems of accountability and a life-size Executive Director.

While the organization breathes into this new period of stability and growth, it can also take seriously the need to prepare for the inevitabilities of change. Strengthening the organization so that it can discuss transition with a sense of calm and purpose will help prepare it for periods of loss, change and gain, the natural stages of organizational growth.

