SEARAC Questionnaire - 2020 Presidential Voter Guide for the Southeast Asian American Community

The Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC) is a national civil rights organization that empowers Cambodian, Laotian, Hmong and Vietnamese communities to create a socially just and equitable society. Please take a few minutes to share your candidate's platform for the following issues below around immigration, education, and health. If you prefer to email your response, please send to SEARAC's National Policy Director, Katrina Dizon Mariategue at katrina@searac.org. These responses will inform the creation of a presidential candidate voter guide to be launched in the spring.

Click here to learn more about SEARAC: [https://www.searac.org/](https://www.searac.org/)

**Contact Information**
Please share your contact information for any follow up questions we may have

1. Candidate Name:
   
   Bernie Sanders

2. Name of Person Responding:
   
   Policy Team

3. Title of Person Responding (Position within Campaign):

4. Contact Email (for follow up questions):
   
   joanhanna@berniesanders.com

**Main Questionnaire**
Please describe your candidate's position (in as much detail as you are comfortable), on the following issues.

1. Education
For SEARAC, Southeast Asian American (SEAA) is a political identity that comes from the shared experience of people who came to this country as refugees from the US occupation of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. SEAAs now number close to 2.7 million. Yet our community’s challenges, stemming from SEAAs’ unique refugee experiences, are often overlooked and masked behind the broader Asian American “model minority” myth, making it more difficult for students to succeed in schools.

Please describe your candidate’s position on:

A. Data Equity / Data Disaggregation

We must ensure we have the best data possible so we can better serve all our communities. That means fixing our Census to ensure the SEAA community is fully counted and data is disaggregated, ensuring student data in our school systems and health care data is disaggregated, and more to address this issue.

B. Culturally relevant K-12 support (ex: ethnic studies, english learner support, culturally relevant parental engagement)

Bernie will make a transformative investment in our children, our teachers and educational support staff, and our schools. As a part of Bernie’s plan to reinvest in public education, he will Triple Title I funding to ensure low-income schools have the resources they need, and ensure access to English as a Second Language instruction, as well as making massive investments to increase educator diversity.

We will invest in the education, training, mentorship, residencies, and hiring of teachers of color to diversify the public school teacher workforce. This includes establishing a dedicated fund of $5 billion to create and expand teacher-training programs at HBCUs, MSIs and tribal colleges and universities to increase educator diversity and providing $5 billion to programs that increase recruitment, retention, and professional development of diverse K-12 teachers.

And we will empower our teachers to provide a teacher-supported curriculum that gives students the best possible education.

Our public schools can and should be more than just places where children learn – they can be community centers that build the health and well-being of students. We must act to transform our education system into a high-quality public good that connects education, health, and social-services to young people and facilitates culturally relevant parental engagement. A strong investment in sustainable community school programs can help us achieve that. President Trump has proposed eliminating funding for community school programs. We have a better idea: a $50 billion investment in sustainable community schools over the next decade to provide a holistic, full-service approach to learning and the wellbeing of our young people that engages.
C. **College access, affordability and completion** (ex: support for AANAPISIs, pell grants, trio, gear up programs)

In the 21st century, a free public education system that goes from kindergarten through high school is no longer good enough. Higher education should be a right for all, not a privilege for the few. When Bernie is President, we will guarantee tuition and debt-free public colleges, universities, HBCUs, Minority Serving Institutions and trade-schools to all, regardless of family income or immigration status. As President, Bernie will ensure all students have access to continue their education without fear of insurmountable loan debt. We will also cancel all student debt for every person in the AANAPISI community, regardless of income.

We will ensure all our students get the help they need so they are ready for college and receive the support they need when they are in college.

In addition to making public colleges, universities, HBCUs, Minority Serving Institutions and trade-schools tuition and debt-free, Bernie will:

- Double funding for the TRIO Programs and increases funding for the GEAR UP Program so more low-income students, students with disabilities, and first-generation students can attend and graduate college with a degree. By increasing our investment in these programs, we will reach 1.5 million students through TRIO programs and more than 100,000 additional students through GEAR UP than the program reaches today.

- Triple funding for the Work-Study Program. By tripling funding for this program, we can build valuable career experiences for students that will help them after they graduate. Today, this program provides about $1,760 per year to some 700,000 students. When we are in the White House, we will expand the program to reach at least 2.1 million students – a 1.4 million student increase. And we will ensure that funding targets schools that have large low-income student enrollment.

- Provide Pell Grants to low-income students to cover the non-tuition and fee costs of school, including: housing, books, supplies, transportation, and other costs of living.

- Require participating states and tribes to cover the full cost of obtaining a degree for low-income students (normally those with a family income of less than $25,000) by covering any gap that may still exist after we eliminate tuition, fees,
and grants.

- Place a cap on student loan interest rates going forward. The federal government shouldn’t make billions of dollars in profit off of student loans while students are drowning in debt. We should invest in young Americans – not leverage their futures. Today, the average interest rate on undergraduate student loans is more than 5 percent. Under this proposal, we will cap student loan interest rates at 1.88 percent.

- In addition to eliminating tuition and fees, we will match any additional spending from states and tribes which reduces the cost of attending school at a dollar for dollar rate. This funding goes beyond closing the cost gap – participating states and tribes could use this money to hire additional faculty, ensure professors get professional development opportunities, and increase students’ access to educational opportunities.

2. Health
The traumatic experiences of war, genocide, and displacement left many SEAAs with physical and mental health conditions that have gone untreated.

Please describe your candidate’s position on:

A. Access to affordable healthcare (ex: ACA and medicaid expansion)

Bernie is running for president because the time is long overdue for the United States to join every other major country on Earth and guarantee health care to all people as a right, not a privilege, regardless of income or immigration status through a Medicare for All program. Bernie’s Medicare for All program will guarantee comprehensive health care to everyone in this country, including the more than one million uninsured Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the United States. Health care is not a commodity. It is a human right. The goal of a health care system should be to keep people well, not to make stockholders rich. Bernie’s Medicare for All program would provide comprehensive health coverage to all with no premiums, deductibles, copayments, or surprise bills.

Medicare coverage will be expanded and improved to include: dental, hearing, vision, and home- and community-based long-term care, in-patient and out-patient services, mental health and substance abuse treatment, reproductive and maternity care, prescription drugs, and more.
And we will stop the pharmaceutical industry from ripping off the American people by making sure that no one in America pays over $200 a year for the medicine they need by capping what Americans pay for prescription drugs under Medicare for All.

Bernie will also expand Community Health Centers to increase access to health care services in underserved communities. Community Health Centers serve 28 million patients a year in underserved communities, 63 percent of which are a racial or ethnic minority. Bernie is also proud to have secured $11 billion for Community Health Centers in the Affordable Care Act.

B. Culturally and linguistically appropriate mental health services

We are experiencing a crisis in mental health treatment in this country. While there has been much talk about mental health parity in our health care system, we are not even close to achieving it. It’s past time for a serious discussion about treating mental illness and ensuring access to care.

Bernie will ensure all providers receive training to provide culturally competent care, and when we are in the White House, we will address the need for more minority doctors, dentists, nurses, and mental health providers who can provide the care that is so desperately needed in their communities.

The National Health Service Corps provides loan repayment to providers who work in underserved communities. This program does an excellent job recruiting and training minority doctors, nurse practitioners, and dentists. By expanding this program, we can not only significantly increase the number of minority health care providers, but underserved communities of color will also receive support in recruiting and retaining minority health care providers.

Bernie’s Medicare for All plan would address the mental health crisis by providing comprehensive coverage for mental health and substance abuse treatment services as well as prescription drugs. Mental health care, under Medicare for All, will be free at the time of service, with no co-payments that can be a barrier to treatment.

This country has a serious shortage of mental health practitioners. We will address this health workforce shortage crisis by increasing funding for the National Health Service Corps, which provides scholarships and loan repayment to clinicians working in underserved communities. Through Medicare for All, we will bring more providers to underserved communities by increasing federal funding for community health centers, which currently serve nearly 30 million people in underserved communities.

Bernie's Medicare for All plan requires an evaluation of health disparities, including racial and geographic disparities, and a plan for addressing the disparities found in the evaluation. It creates an Office of Primary Health to figure out how to increase access to care, including how to train the workforce we need to address these disparities.
Bernie’s Medicare for All, mental health care will be just as important as physical health care.

Bernie will also expand the sustainable community school model which will fund trauma-informed care and services in schools, especially those schools which have been impacted by the War on Drugs, immigration raids, and shootings.

We must not only guarantee health care to all as a right with Medicare for All, we must also end the long-standing racial disparities that exist within America’s health care workforce.

As President, Bernie will:

- Expand the National Health Service Corps.
- Dramatically expand access to community health centers which provide primary medical, dental, and mental health care, as well as low-cost prescription drugs, to nearly 30 million Americans, 63 percent of whom are racial and ethnic minorities.
- Significantly expand the Teaching Health Center Graduate Medical Education program to educate and train more primary care providers of color to provide primary care in underserved communities of color.
- Allow nurse practitioners and physician assistants to practice at the highest level of their training. This is critical if we are to address our primary health care workforce shortage, especially in underserved communities of color.
- Drastically expand the Nurse Practitioner Residency Training Program, and the Nurse Faculty Loan Program to develop the workforce we need.
- Cancel all student debt so that doctors and nurses are free to work in communities that need care the most.
- Establish a dedicated fund of $5 billion to create and expand medical and dental provider training programs at HBCUs, MSIs and tribal colleges and universities to help end the shortage of minority doctors, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, dentists, dental hygienists, psychologists, and other medical providers.
- Establish a dedicated fund to create and expand mentorship and academic advising for undergraduate historically black college and university (HBCU) and minority-serving institution (MSI) students studying to attend medical and dental schools.

C. Government programs to support low income families (particularly SNAP and SSI)
Bernie’s campaign is about creating a government and economy that work for the many, not just the few. We are the wealthiest nation in the history of the world. We should not have grotesque levels of wealth inequality in which three billionaires own more wealth than the bottom half of the country. Bernie is running for president because a great nation is judged not by how many billionaires it has, but by how it treats the most vulnerable.

President Trump has repeatedly tried to cut vital assistance programs and make it harder for people to figure out where their next meal is coming from. We must reject these absurd proposals, and focus on expanding programs that help lift people out of poverty. At a time when tens of millions of Americans are already struggling to put food on the table, we are not going to cut these programs. Instead, we are going to expand them to ensure no one in the United States goes hungry. And we will ensure all families are able to get the assistance they need by passing the Embrace Act introduced by Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to ensure immigrants get the assistance they need.

We will protect and expand SNAP benefits to make sure that all people in this country don’t have to worry about where their next meal comes from. We will expand the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) by $311 billion to increase the benefits from the “thrifty” plan which provides inadequate benefits to the more generous “low-cost” food plan, include those with incomes up to 200 percent of the federal poverty line, remove punitive work requirements, remove barriers for college students to access SNAP, and ensure people are not denied benefits due to past interaction with the criminal justice system. We will expand the SNAP program and benefits to the people of Puerto Rico, the Northern Mariana Islands, and American Samoa so they are on par with the benefits in the continental United States. And we will allow SNAP recipients to purchase hot and prepared foods with their benefits.

He will pass the Universal School Meals Program Act to provide universal, year-round, free breakfast, lunch, snacks, and dinner at school, eliminate all school meal lunch debt and end “lunch debt shaming,” and expand Summer EBT across the country to ensure no student goes hungry during the summer.

He will expand the WIC program for pregnant mothers, infants, and children. He will raise the eligibility to age 6 and allow WIC certification to apply for the first two years of a child’s life and increase outreach to eligible families to increase take-up. Currently, only 50 percent of eligible pregnant women participate in the program.

Today in America, about 1 in 4 Americans lives with a disability. Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) is an earned benefit that covers more than 150 million workers and lifts millions of people with disabilities and their families out of poverty. Currently, the SSDI program faces a massive backlog and a wait time for applicants that can stretch into years. Thousands of Americans have died waiting for a hearing. This is unacceptable. The United States spends far less than other rich nations on assistance for people with disabilities. We must ensure dignity for Americans with disabilities by expanding benefit levels and giving them access to their earned benefits in a timely manner.
Additionally, Supplemental Security Insurance provides a small but crucial lifeline for those with disabilities and low incomes, including children. SSI supports 1.2 million children with disabilities, lifting hundreds of thousands out of poverty and substantially reducing deep poverty. But SSI benefits do not even reach the federal poverty line and have been targeted for cuts by Trump and the GOP. We must protect and expand SSI for those who need it the most.

As president, Bernie will:

- Protect and expand the Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) programs and end the massive disability backlog to end wait lists for people with disabilities to access their earned benefits.
- Expand benefits across-the-board for all Social Security beneficiaries, including SSI, and increase and index the SSI benefit level so that it is equal to 125 percent of the poverty line.
- Eliminate the SSI asset test. It is unacceptable that we force people with disabilities to spend down so they qualify for SSI and force recipients off the program if they see a small sum of money come in that puts them over the asset threshold. When we are in the White House, we will eliminate the asset threshold to ensure people with disabilities get the benefits they need.
- Eliminate the SSDI benefits cliff. Currently, SSDI recipients lose all their benefits when they go above the substantial gainful activity threshold, even if only by a single dollar. We will work with Congress to fix the benefits cliff by providing for a gradual replacement of $1 for every $2 of earnings, similar to the existing SSI program.
- Raise the Substantial Gainful Activity threshold. Current law places the Substantial Gainful Activity threshold at $2,110 for blind Americans and $1,260 for non-blind Americans with a disability. People with disabilities should be able to enter the workforce without facing serious financial penalties. As president, Bernie will work with Congress to raise the Substantial Gainful Activity level and equalize it at 250% of the Federal Poverty Level. This will raise the Substantial Gainful Activity threshold for both blind and non-blind Americans with disabilities and allow it to account for family size, recognizing the different economic impacts of disability depending on family circumstances.
- Bring back student benefits for children of deceased workers and workers with disabilities that were eliminated in 1983.
- Combine the Social Security Disability Insurance Trust Fund and the Old Age and Survivors Trust fund to protect benefits.
- Issue a moratorium on all closures of field offices and other SSA offices.
- Remove the marriage penalty from SSI benefits.
- Remove barriers and disincentives to work for SSI benefits recipients.
- Eliminate the “in-kind support and maintenance” provision.
- Reverse the Trump administration’s cruel eligibility rule for SSI and SSDI.
- Hold people with disabilities harmless from overpayments. Currently, if SSA accidentally overpays an SSI or SSDI recipient, they may be held personally liable for paying it back, even if the overpayment takes place over a period of years,
leading to a substantial backlog that is not the fault of the beneficiary. We will end this practice.

- Eliminate the two-year Medicare waiting period for SSDI recipients by passing Medicare for All.
- Hire more Administrative Law Judges to hear appeals.
- Bring parity to the treatment of Puerto Ricans and others living in U.S. territories in federal programs such as SSI.
- Work with disability rights advocates and clinicians to update the Social Security disability claims process to ensure people with conditions that are not easily proven by tests, such as migraines, are treated fairly in the claims process.
- Take SSA funding outside the budget caps established by the Budget Control Act and sequestration, as allowed under the Social Security Act itself. We would also work with Congress to ensure a permanent end to discretionary caps.

He will also:

- Expand the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program by $25 billion to help low-income families pay their heating and cooling bills. Additionally, the program will be expanded to provide 10 percent of program costs for maintenance of new efficient heating and cooling systems and technical assistance for the installation and use of new furnaces, heat pumps, boilers, and other upgrades for the duration of the 10-year transition.
- Guarantee everyone the right to a clean environment. We will launch the decade of the Green New Deal, a 10-year, nationwide mobilization centered around justice and equity. Together, we will solve our climate crisis, create 20 million jobs, and save our planet for future generations. The Green New Deal is not only a serious climate plan, but an opportunity to uproot historical injustices and inequities to advance social, racial, environmental and economic justice, including redressing the exclusion of black, brown, Native American, and other vulnerable communities from the programs that made up the original New Deal.
- Guarantee health care to all as a human right, regardless of income or immigration status, by passing Medicare for All.
- Guarantee the right to a decent job that pays a living wage. That means raising the minimum wage to a living wage for all, enacting a federal jobs guarantee, and making it easier for workers to join unions. We will guarantee all workers paid family and medical leave, paid sick leave, and paid vacation, and ensure survivors of domestic violence receive paid leave as well.
- Guarantee every person – regardless of income – a fundamental right to a safe, decent, accessible, and affordable home by implementing his $2.5 trillion Housing for All plan to end our affordable housing crisis. In the richest country on Earth, we will invest nearly $32 billion over the next five years to end homelessness in America. And fully fund tenant-based Housing Choice Vouchers, also known as Section 8, and make it a mandatory program for all eligible households, strengthen the Fair Housing Act and implement a Section 8 non-discrimination law so that landlords can no longer discriminate against low-income families based on their source of income.
3. Immigration

SEAAs are the largest community of refugees ever resettled in America. We are a vibrant, diverse, and growing community of refugees, the children of refugees, people sponsored by refugee families, and more recently arrived immigrants who have come to the U.S. on family-based and employment visas.

Please describe your candidate’s position on:

A. **Ending unjust mandatory detention and deportations** (including those with criminal records)

On day one of his Administration, Bernie will put a moratorium on deportations until a thorough audit of current and past practices and policies is complete. He will also direct the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Justice to end all federal contracts with private prisons and detention centers. He will direct the Department of Health and Human Services to reunite families separated by the federal government swiftly, and will connect detainees and unaccompanied minors with family members, sponsors, and supports, such as legal counsel.

Bernie will end the use of CBP’s cruel, freezing holding facilities, often referred to as “the iceboxes,” or las hieleras. All facilities used to hold migrants, even temporarily, will be required to meet strict, enforceable standards. Bernie will also work with Congress to pass the Dignity for Detained Immigrants Act, introduced by Rep. Pramila Jayapal, which will virtually end detention entirely for asylum seekers and other vulnerable persons, requiring release on recognizance or alternatives to detention. We will establish a presumption of release for all detained immigrants, ensuring that detention is only used in rare cases of flight risk or demonstrated and proven threat to another individual.

He will repeal the 1996 immigration laws, restoring case by case discretion for independent immigration judges and ending mandatory detention and expedited removal.

B. **Strengthening naturalization programs** (ex: funding, support for limited English populations)

Trump has not only waged a divisive campaign against immigrants at the border, but has also worked to make it harder and slower to immigrate through all channels and has made it harder for those residing in the United States to become citizens. Under Trump, USCIS has slowed their approval processes and added to the growing backlog of pending immigration applications. Bernie will reverse Trump’s posture and ensure all agencies tasked with distributing benefits and reviewing immigration applications are fully
funded and staffed, and cut waiting times, costs, and bureaucratic complexities for those pursuing legal permanent residency and naturalization.

As President, Bernie will:

- Ensure customs and immigration agencies have the funding and personnel necessary to eliminate the backlog of pending applications and cut wait times for immigration applications.
- Work with Congress to provide funding to swiftly unify families stuck in pending backlogs.
- Provide necessary funding for outreach, integration, and naturalization programs.
- Protect and expand family-based visas and cut waiting times and backlogs.
- Overhaul and streamline the visa system to reduce errors and costs and eliminate burdensome fees.
- Eliminate discrimination facing LGBTQ+ families throughout immigration laws, including making sure that all children born to U.S. citizen parents have acquired citizenship, regardless of a biological relationship.
- Direct the newly created National Office of Disability Coordination to work with agencies to ensure the immigration and citizenship process is fully accessible to people with disabilities.
  - This includes streamlining our visa and citizenship system and making it easier to navigate, fully accessible, and broadly inclusive.
  - Ensure customs and immigration agencies make reasonable accommodations and, where necessary, disability waivers for the English and civics test broadly available and publicized for people with disabilities to access.

C. Protecting and expanding family immigration

Bernie supports a family-based immigration system grounded in civil and human rights. He believes we must stand up for our values and accept refugees, asylum-seekers, and families who come to the United States in search of the American Dream. This is how America was built and it has made our country strong.

We will ensure any path to citizenship does not come with a reduction in traditional, family-based visas, and we will protect and expand family-based visas, as well as cut waiting times and backlogs.

Is there anything else you would like us to know?

This is a campaign not just to win the Democratic primary, and not just to defeat Donald Trump, although we must and we will. This is a campaign to bring fundamental political change to America.
When Bernie is in the White House, the principles of our government will not be greed, hatred and lies. It will not be racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia and religious bigotry. The principles of our government will be based on justice: economic justice, social justice, racial justice and environmental justice. Together, we will tell the powerful special interests who control so much of our economic and political life that we will no longer tolerate the greed and corruption of corporate America and the billionaire class – which has resulted in this country having more income and wealth inequality than any other major country on earth.

The only way we achieve this is through a political revolution – where millions of people get involved in the political process just as all of you have done and work together to reclaim our democracy.

Nothing will fundamentally change in America unless we have the guts to take on Wall Street, the insurance industry, the pharmaceutical industry, the military-industrial complex, private prisons and detention centers, and the fossil fuel industry. As president, that is exactly what I will do.

At the end of the day, the one percent may have enormous wealth and power, but they are just the one percent. When the 99 percent stand together, we can transform society.

Together, we will build a world based on peace and justice, not war and destruction. We will invest in our people, not spend unlimited money on endless wars, not discrimination and hate. We will invest in our people to achieve economic, racial, social, and environmental justice for all.