

Ohio House of Representatives

Finance Subcommittee on Agriculture, Development, and Natural Resources

Testimony of Scott Piepho

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Thank you for the opportunity to address the subcommittee today. My name is Scott Piepho. I serve as interim Co-CEO of Asian Services In Action or ASIA, Inc. I come before you to advocate for fully funded census outreach in this biennium's budget.

ASIA, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) human services organization based in Northeast Ohio with locations in Cuyahoga and Summit counties. We serve primarily immigrant and refugee populations, offering everything from early childhood programs to senior services. In addition, we operate Federally Qualified Health Centers in each county. We focus on providing culturally appropriate services and care in the native languages of clients. We also take up as part of our mission advocating for immigrants and refugees, particularly those within Ohio's Asian American and Pacific Islander community.

In 2010 ASIA, Inc. did grant-funded field work in the communities that we serve to secure census responses. We have begun organizing a similar effort regarding the 2020 Census with coalition partners across the state.

Today I'm going to discuss one aspect of ASIA, Inc.'s work and how it informs some of our concerns about the upcoming census. The last fifteen or so years have seen an influx of refugees into Akron. Most of our refugee population currently consists of Nepali speakers from Bhutan and Burmese. The newest wave has primarily been made up of Swahili speakers, mostly from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

These new communities are revitalizing neighborhoods, establishing small businesses and otherwise helping to drive growth in the region. At the same time, we know that members of these communities often need some years of services to help them acclimate to their new surroundings and achieve economic self-sufficiency.

While most members of the Nepali, Burmese and Swahili communities are refugees, not all are. Some are family members of refugees who have immigrated on family visas. Some Nepali in our area came under Temporary Protective Status after the Gorkha Earthquake in Nepal in 2015. In addition to refugee settlement, Summit County has seen considerable secondary migration into the county, some ex-migration and increasingly movement within the county out into suburbs.

When we worked on the 2010 Census, it took a great deal of work to secure the level of responses from our service communities that we did. Traditionally, members of immigrant and refugee communities have tended to respond at lower rates than natives. Partly that is due to language barriers and to being new to this country and therefore unfamiliar with the decennial census.

In addition, refugees and immigrants from authoritarian countries prefer to minimize interacting with the government – particularly the national government. In their lived experiences, avoiding interactions with government officials in their home countries was often a matter of survival.

We anticipate that securing responses in the upcoming census will be more challenging than in 2010. First, the community is much larger than it was ten years ago. Second, the new census will be mostly online and a significant portion of the refugee communities are older people who are not adopting digital technology.

Finally, we are hearing that distrust in our government is increasing in our communities due to the current administration's well-publicized stands against immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. To take one example, the president had expressed his intention to end the temporary protective status of Nepali earthquake survivors. Members of our community spent months fearing that they would be subject to deportation before that decision was recently reversed. Many understand that the President could again reverse course and end TPS for them at any time.

Undercounting immigrants and refugees would be detrimental to those communities, but also to the areas where they live and to the state as a whole. Federal and state agencies make grant determinations based in part on demographic data from the census. Those grants help organizations like ASIA, Inc. provide the services that refugees and other new residents settle, transition and ultimately achieve self-sufficiency.

Most of the demographic data we have about these communities is based on the last census and therefore ten years out of date. When we make our strategic planning decision and apply for

grants, we know we are doing so with incomplete information. If the 2020 Census does not accurately reflect the size of the communities we serve, we and other organizations like us cannot secure the funding we need to fully support our programming. The inevitable period of dependence before self-sufficiency will grow longer and the economic impact of these new residents will be less.

ASIA, Inc. is committed to doing as much census work as we can afford to do again in 2020. We urge this committee to fully fund census outreach.