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State Representative Richard Dell'Aquila

Thank you Chairman Wiggam, Vice Chairman Dean, Ranking Member Brennan, and distinguished members of the Ohio House State and Local Government Committee for the opportunity to present my joint sponsor testimony together with Representative Isaacsohn in support of HB204, a bill proposing to commemorate April as "Arab American Heritage Month" in Ohio. I would like to supplement his testimony by reviewing generally the history, importance and necessity of formally recognizing the many contributions of our fellow citizens that motivated the introduction of this bill.

It is often said that diversity is our greatest strength as a nation. It is essential that we continue celebrating, promoting, and educating ourselves about the many ways that the Arab people have contributed to that strength and advanced human civilization. Moreover, by sharing and honoring the stories of fellow Americans, this formal commemoration will dispel unwarranted stereotypes and encourage greater civic cohesion through education.

Since the late 1800's Arabs began immigrating to the United States as so many others did, fleeing war, persecution and economic hardship, settling mostly in the Northeast and Midwest, finding work here in sales and as grocers and other professions. But that was only the beginning of a rich and growing legacy.

Ohio now has the 8th largest population of Arab Americans and one of the fastest growing Arab populations in the United States, with over 115,000 people here. Columbus is the Ohio city with the highest number of Arab-American residents. More than 3.5 million Americans have Arabic lineage according to the 2020 census, with ancestries originating in 22 countries across the middle east and north Africa. In 2021, the President recognized April as "National Arab-American Month." Following that lead in the state with the 8th largest Arab-American population will formally recognize Arab-American culture here in Ohio too as an essential component of our shared heritage.

Arab Americans have made significant contributions in every field and profession. Did you know, for example, that Apple CEO Steve Jobs hired Arab American inventor Anthony "Tony" Fadell to run a then new special projects group within the company to develop the iPod? Fadell, who is now known as "the father of the iPod," went on to oversee the continued development of the device, which then lead to the creation of a cell phone with many of the same features as the iPod—the iPhone. He then worked on developing the first three generations of the iPhone.

Born in Louisiana to Lebanese immigrants, Michael DeBakey grew up spending time in his father's pharmacy, earned a medical degree and served in the Army Surgeon General's Office during World War II. It was during this time that DeBakey developed special units to provide surgical care to soldiers wounded near the front lines, which later became known as MASH (i.e. Mobile Auxiliary Surgical Hospital) units during the Korean and Vietnam wars.

DeBakey went on to make several other surgical contributions, including the first successful removal of a blockage of the carotid artery, developing coronary bypass surgery, pioneering the field of televised medicine with the first demonstration of open-heart surgery transmitted overseas via satellite, and being the first to install a partial artificial heart.

These are just a couple examples—the full list is much longer. Whether in the fields of internet security, emotion recognition computer technology, or even the development of the ice cream cone at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, Arab-Americans have contributed, and continue to contribute in so many important ways to the development and well-being of our society.

It is therefore entirely appropriate and well-earned that Ohio should join the growing number of other states, including Illinois, Oregon and Virginia which passed similar legislation by 2022 designating April as “Arab American Heritage Month,” and those with similar legislation pending at that time in Indiana, Maryland, Michigan, New York, and Rhode Island, and of course, here in Ohio.

Thank you to my joint sponsor, representative Dani Isaacsohn, for working with me on this proposal. And thank you to my friend of many years, Pierre Bejjani, founder and President of CAMEO (Cleveland American Middle East Organization) of which I am a member, for bringing this important measure to my attention. CAMEO is a non-profit organization, non-partisan, secular, and open to all, designed to articulate the interests of the thousands of northeastern Ohio residents of middle eastern heritage.

Thank you for your consideration, and we would be pleased to respond to your questions.