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HB 25 Sponsor Testimony

Chair Wiggam, Vice Chair Dean, Ranking Member Brennan, and members of the State and Local Government Committee thank you for allowing me to provide sponsor testimony for House Bill 25. Ohio is home to a vibrant and rapidly growing Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community, with Franklin County representing the largest AAPI population in the state. Despite their significant contributions to Ohio's economy, culture, and society, the AAPI community remains underserved and underrepresented at the state level. HB 25, which proposes the creation of the Ohio Asian-American and Pacific Islander Affairs Commission and the Office of Asian-American and Pacific Islander Affairs, is an essential step toward addressing this disparity.

The AAPI population in Ohio has grown substantially in recent decades, reflecting a broader national trend. In Franklin County, close to 25% of one legislative district identifies as Asian, underscoring the importance of creating a commission to represent their interests. However, there is currently no formal mechanism for the AAPI community to effectively engage with state government or for policymakers to address the unique challenges this community faces.

The Ohio Asian Advisory Council, created in 2010, provided an initial step in acknowledging the AAPI community's needs but lacked the funding and structure to effect substantive change. Without renewal in recent years, the gap in collaboration between the state government and the AAPI community has widened. HB 25 aims to bridge this gap by creating a fully funded and empowered commission dedicated to amplifying AAPI voices and addressing their concerns.

The AAPI community encounters distinct challenges that require dedicated attention and resources, including:

- **Language Barriers:** Many AAPI Ohioans face difficulties accessing government services due to limited English proficiency.
- **Housing Access:** Discrimination and economic barriers disproportionately affect access to affordable housing for AAPI individuals and families.
- **Health Equity:** Health disparities, including mental health stigma, often go unaddressed in the AAPI community due to cultural and systemic barriers.
- **Rising Hate Crimes:** Since the COVID-19 pandemic, AAPI communities have experienced a disturbing increase in hate crimes and microaggressions, necessitating a statewide response.

These issues not only affect the well-being of AAPI individuals but also hinder the broader economic and social progress of Ohio.

By establishing the AAPI Commission and Office, Ohio will:

1. **Ensure Representation:** Provide the AAPI community with a formal platform to voice their concerns and participate in state-level decision-making.
2. **Strengthen Collaboration:** Foster communication and partnerships between state agencies and AAPI organizations to address community-specific challenges.
3. **Encourage Equity and Inclusion:** Develop strategies to dismantle systemic barriers and promote equity in public services, housing, health care, and education.
4. **Combat Hate and Discrimination:** Coordinate efforts to prevent hate crimes, raise awareness, and promote cultural understanding across the state.

Unlike its predecessor, the proposed commission and office will receive adequate funding to compensate commission members and support their operational duties. This financial commitment ensures that the initiative will have the resources necessary to make meaningful progress and address community concerns effectively.

Ohio is stronger when all communities have a voice in shaping its future. The creation of the AAPI Commission is not just a matter of equity—it is an opportunity for the state to tap into the talent, perspectives, and experiences of over 300,000 AAPI residents. House Bill 25 will pave the way for effective cross-collaboration, mutual understanding, and a more inclusive Ohio for all.

The time to act is now. The establishment of the Ohio Asian-American and Pacific Islander Affairs Commission and Office is long overdue. By passing HB 25, Ohio will demonstrate its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion while addressing the specific needs of a vital and growing community. Again, Chair Wiggam, Vice Chair Dean, Ranking Member Brennan, and members of the State and Local Government Committee thank you for allowing me to provide sponsor testimony today, and I will be happy to answer any questions.