



**Interested Party Testimony- House HHS Subcommittee
HB 33- State Operating Budget
March 21, 2023**

Chair Carruthers and Ranking Member Liston - Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 33, the State Operating Budget, in support of MY Project USA's funding request which would appropriate \$200,000 in each fiscal year within the Department of Job and Family Service's TANF Block Grant for MY Project USA to provide mentoring, recreation, leadership, and literacy programming for at-risk youth.

My name is Zerqa Abid, and I am the founder and volunteer Executive Director of MY Project USA, a nonprofit that I started from my kitchen 8 years ago when I learned about a human trafficking gang trafficking minor Muslim girls from Columbus to Nashville TN and Minnesota. We are now the largest Muslim social Services in Ohio headquartered in the Hilltop Neighborhood on the west side of Columbus.

I was born in Pakistan and came to the United States at age 26 with two children under the age of 5. Even though I am a professional and college graduate, I still found it hard to adjust, both as a woman and as a parent. In 2013, when I learned about local Muslim girls being trafficked by truck drivers as they were trying to run away from parental abuse, it hit me extremely hard. My heart broke for these young women, and for their parents. I dropped all my paid projects as media and marketing consultant and launched the organization on westside.

For those of you who may not be familiar with Hilltop, it is located on the West side of Columbus and is home to thousands of families that are struggling to get by. These include many immigrant families—including thousands of Somali Bantu immigrants—who face significant language, educational, and cultural barriers to success. All the families that MYPUSA serves are living in poverty, many with incomes of only \$6,000 per year. This poverty and lack of hope creates bad outcomes for far too many in the community. Shockingly, 40% of human trafficking and drug deals in Columbus occurs on and around Sullivant Avenue.

This area has also been identified as a food desert. According to Feeding America, Franklin County, Ohio has a child food insecurity rate of 17.5% (well above the national average of 14.6%) and over 52 thousand food insecure children. Predators take advantage of Hilltop's youth and capitalize on their vulnerabilities like lack of food. In starting MY Project USA, it was my mission to protect and save these vulnerable children and serve this community.

This is why we opened the Hilltop Youth Empowerment on Sullivant Ave and have been focused on Wedgewood Village Apartments that was called deadliest location of Columbus after 17 shootings and 7 homicides in just seven months in 2017.

At MY Project USA, we believe all children have the right to a safe, enriching environment that will allow them to reach their full potential as productive citizens. To achieve this, we become the catalyst to protect and empower underserved youth. We build capacity and uplift families through education, social services, civic engagement and advocacy, creating compassionate youth who will build a safer, stronger, just and more inclusive America.

We provide academic supports, career and college prep, adult career services, and youth programming and recreation.

Our youth center holds our food pantry which is open 4 days a week and serves about 600 families on a weekly basis. In 2022, the pantry served about 330,000 meals and snacks to 47,000 clients. This is one of the many ways we support our community.

The pride of MY Project USA is our Hilltop Tigers Soccer Program. We serve 150 youth through this program, where youth compete at the highest levels and learn valuable social skills such as teamwork, discipline, and determination. 350 youth participate in our summer league. This program has been recognized as one of the top public safety reimagined programs by the City of Columbus.

Sadly, the violence of our neighborhood hit home when one of our own was killed. On July 22, 2022, 15-year-old Issa Jeylani was playing soccer with his friends when he was murdered in a shooting at a park in the Hilltop. His friends, also his teammates, witnessed the event. Issa was a very bright, happy, optimistic kid. He was one of the best on our soccer team, a champion, but his life was cut short to what the police determined was gang violence. This story is not uncommon in our neighborhood which is why I do everything I can to stop this from happening.

Over the past eight years in operation, MYPUSA has achieved numerous successes. We have served more than 220,000 individuals through our vast array of programs, provided more than 4.5 million meals and snacks, donated over 50,000 household and clothing items such as coats and other basic supplies to families, and have accumulated over 80,000 hours of community service.

The model of MY Project USA is one that can be replicated in other communities facing the same issues. I have been asked to speak to nonprofits around the state on our model and how it can be set up in other communities. This model is extremely successful with immigrant and refugee families who face challenges much different from many others. With funding from the state, we can serve more kids and continue to empower our community but also continue to develop this model so it may serve other communities.

I respectfully ask you to support our amendment of \$200,000 in each fiscal year within the Department of Job and Family Service's TANF Block Grant for MY Project USA to provide mentoring, recreation, leadership, and literacy programming for at-risk youth. I can answer any questions at this time.

I can take any questions you may have at this time.

Thank you.

Zerqa Abid
Founder
MY Project USA