

Written Testimony for SC 2198
Submitted by: Mo-Yee Lee, Ph.D.
Asian American Community Services
Testifying as Proponent

Chair Dolan, Vice Chair Gavarone, Ranking Member Sykes and members of the Senate Finance committee,

My name is Mo-Yee Lee, and I live in Columbus, Ohio. I am representing Asian American Community Services (AACS). AACS is a non-profit community-based organization originally established in 1976. The central mission of our agency is to improve the well-being and quality of life of Asian and Asian-American communities in Central Ohio by providing social services and empowering individuals through education, training, and leadership. Ohio's Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) population is one of the state's fastest-growing racial/ethnic demographic groups, having increased by 40% between 2000 and 2009. Central Ohio is the home to over 100,000 AAPIs, with an estimated 76,372 AAPIs residing in Franklin County and 16,107 in Delaware County. The growth in the AAPI population mirrors a nationwide trend, with AAPIs having been the fastest-growing racial group in the U.S. between 2010 and 2017. According to 2018 U.S. Census estimates, the U.S. is home to approximately 24.2 million AAPIs.

Despite this growth, AAPIs are underrepresented in leadership positions and many of our community needs remain underserved. To this end, it is notable that currently, Asian and AAPI Ohioans are the only ethnic group without a state level entity that would allow for coordination of resources and provide a centralized point of contact.

For this reason, I am writing in support of the budget amendment that creates and funds the Ohio AAPI Commission and the Office of AAPI Affairs. With the escalation of anti-Asian violence that has accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic, the deaths of six Asian women on March 16th in Atlanta, and the loss of four Sikh lives in the Indianapolis shooting on April 15th, we in the Ohio Asian and AAPI community are living in a constant state of fear and anxiety. Something needs to change. While resolutions and statements of solidarity help bring awareness to anti-Asian hate, we must take actionable steps to protect AAPI communities from further harm and violence and to invest in our wellbeing and livelihood.

Your support for the Ohio AAPI Commission and Office of AAPI affairs along with your support for the additional two amendments listed below will help demonstrate that Ohio is invested in our community's safety and well-being:

1. Create and Fund the Ohio AAPI Affairs Commission and the Office of AAPI Affairs
2. \$2M earmarks for grants for community organizations that serve Asians and AAPIs
3. Increases earmarks for Refugee Program Services by \$100,000 per year

Asians are chronically under-represented in U.S. census data due to language barriers and fear of misuse of the collected data. This underrepresentation in census data leads to an inaccurate understanding of the true needs of our communities, making language access a critical service in supporting the well-being of AAPI Ohioans. With respect to language access, over 34% of the U.S. AAPI population reports limited English proficiency, with Vietnamese, Korean, Cambodian, Chinese, and Hmong communities having even higher levels of limited English proficiency.

In fact, while Asian Americans have long been viewed by mainstream American society as a racial minority group that has achieved great socioeconomic success, this perception masks the reality for many AAPIs. This harmful and misleading perception, commonly referred to as the "Model Minority Myth", fails to address the true needs of our communities. For example, Asian Americans actually have a higher poverty rate (12.3%) than non-Hispanic whites (9.8%). Income inequality among Asian populations in the U.S. has also become a major problem, with Asians displacing Black Americans as the most economically divided racial or ethnic group in the U.S. according to 2018 data.

We at AACS see these types of socioeconomic disparities and lack of language access every day, right here in Central Ohio. One of our programs at AACS is the Healthy Asian Youth (HAY) program, which recognizes the educational needs of underserved students in grades K-12. Although the HAY program is open to kids of all backgrounds, the vast majority of our participants are Cambodian-American children of refugee families in the Hilltop area of Columbus. These kids have social and emotional needs that cannot always be met by their families due to intergenerational post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental illnesses, academic needs that are unmet at home due to being raised in a single-parent household where the parent is working, and engagement needs due to the many destructive draws in their community including gambling, substance use, and gang involvement. Nationwide, Cambodian and Cambodian-American families tend to have lower rates of educational achievement and therefore, much higher rates of poverty than the general public. Through HAY, we hope to give kids the tools they need to not just survive, but thrive.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, our HAY staff went above and beyond to do everything they can for program participants, particularly those from the most vulnerable families, to have access to the educational resources they needed. This was no doubt an unprecedented challenge, particularly at a time when the staff, some of whom are also members of the AAPI community, would have faced pandemic-related stress and sense of insecurity over anti-Asian violence. Both before and during this pandemic, the HAY program's achievements have been heavily driven by the passion and dedication of our HAY program staff and volunteers.

Another program at AACS seeking to address the often ignored socioeconomic disparities within the Asian community and lack of language is the Senior Outreach program. The program serves underserved Cambodian and Korean seniors in Franklin County through culturally-specific and in-language case management services. The program serves approximately 170 seniors a year through our two bilingual program staff members, connecting them to much needed public services and providing them with the assistance they need to live independently. Again, the program has been able to achieve the success it has thanks to the dedication of our Senior Outreach program staff.

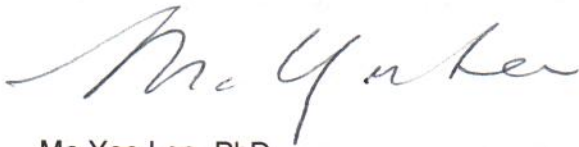
The establishment of Ohio AAPI Affairs Commission and the Office of AAPI Affairs will not only bring visibility to the very real issues faced by AAPI Ohioans but can also enhance the critical services our community members need and help connect them to these services. A commission could help provide an infrastructure for language assistance and facilitate connecting AAPI community members to the services needed with the language support needed. The availability of language assistance can also impact Ohio's ability to obtain more accurate census count, which may translate to increased federal funding.

Earmarks for grants for community organizations that serve Asians and AAPIs will help organizations such as AACS provide critical, culturally responsive services to our communities in underserved areas. In addition to the HAY program and the Senior Outreach program, AACS also offers culturally sensitive services to crime victims through the Family Support Program (FSP), aids in enhancing access to health care and screenings through the Health Care and Prevention program, provides interpreting services in 30+ Asian languages, and holds English as a Second Language (ESL) and senior computer literacy classes.

In particular, the FSP assists victims of hate bias, domestic violence, sexual assault, human-trafficking, and other crimes by assisting our clients navigate and access emergency assistance, transportation, and other critical services in a culturally appropriate manner. The availability and accessibility of this program is particularly critical at a time when we have witnessed a dramatic escalation of anti-Asian violence. Our Health Care and Prevention program is also critical in promoting health equity for AAPIs, who underutilize mental health services and health care services in general.

For these reasons, I respectfully and strongly encourage the Senate Finance Committee to pass these amendments. Thank you for your time and for the opportunity to testify in support of the above amendments.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Mo Yee Lee".

Mo Yee Lee, PhD

Chair, AACS Board of Directors

Professor & PhD Program Director

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