

**Written Testimony for SC 2198**  
**Submitted by: Sudarshan Pyakurel**  
**Bhutanese Community of Central Ohio**  
**Testifying as Proponent**

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

My name is Sudarshan Pyakurel, and I live in Reynoldsburg, Ohio. I am the Executive Director of the Bhutanese Community of Central Ohio, a member of the State of Ohio New American Advisory Committee, and a member of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services SAMHSA steering committee. I am also a proud graduate of The Ohio State University.

The Bhutanese American community is one of the largest Asian American communities in Ohio and is the largest refugee population in the state. Ohio is home to an estimated 55-60,000 Bhutanese Americans, adding to the state's fastest-growing AAPI racial/ethnic demographic group. It is notable that currently, Asian and AAPI Ohioans are the only ethnic group without a state-level entity (office or commission) that would allow for coordination of resources and provide a centralized point of contact and coordination.

As a former refugee who spent 17 years in a UN organized refugee camp, I have been through ethnic cleansing, state persecution, ethnic violence, religious intolerance, and hate. During my many years in the refugee camp, the light at end of the tunnel was the opportunity to be resettled in the United States. It was the happiest moment of my life when my interview and application with the Department of Homeland Security was cleared, and I was accepted to enter the US for resettlement. Although it was a long process and took almost a year to go through the thorough vetting process, the wait time was the most memorable in my life. When I landed at the Hopkins International Airport in Cleveland on the cold night of February 25th, 2010, it was a moment of triumph after two decades of nightmarish life.

Since then, I have been a true Ohioan serving my fellow community members. My role is to facilitate the successful transition of the refugees to their new lives in Ohio. Today, the Bhutanese American community alone combined new business creation is worth more than \$100 million, which reflects the economic impact of more than 500 small businesses. Over 10,000 Bhutanese American families now own homes in Ohio. Children of the recently resettled refugee community have worked hard and are excelling in Ohio's schools. Many are now pursuing higher education at prestigious universities in Ohio and around the US, as well as in our state's excellent community colleges, where they're pursuing careers in health care, IT, engineering, nursing, business, education, and social work. The first family to be resettled in Ohio was in May 2008. This positive resettlement transformation of thousands in Ohio happened in just over 10 years. There is no country in the world where such a transformation happens within a decade, except in the United States. I am extremely proud to say I am an American citizen.

In Central Ohio alone, refugees contribute \$1.6 billion annually in revenue, according to the Refugee Impact Study conducted by the Small Business Development Center at Columbus State Community College and the City of Columbus in 2015. This is just the beginning. If appropriate incentives, training, and opportunity is provided to Bhutanese American business, families, and individuals, this positive economic impact will continue to grow in the next decade, generating many new jobs and increased tax revenue to the state in the billions of dollars.

Bhutanese American created businesses can be found in many industries including home health care, real estate, insurance, retail pharmacies, auto care, grocery stores, restaurants, apparel, jewelry, cosmetics & salons, and farming, among many other areas.

After a decade of hard work, prosperity and peace in the US, my community continues to experience racism, religious and ethnic intolerance, and physical attacks on minorities, women, and vulnerable individuals on the streets of this great nation. In February of this year, an elderly woman was raped by four men in her Columbus apartment and a young man was assaulted in his own apartment here in Central Ohio. They had done nothing wrong to anyone, but simply because they were immigrants, refugees, minorities, and perhaps they did not look like one of the attackers. Both incidents were covered by local media. Violent incidents like these not only shock and baffle us but also re-traumatize the whole community.

We are peaceful, law-abiding, and hard-working New Americans. My community is valued by employers across many industries as hard-working people who want to do well in the United States. Local business executives come to meet with me and talk about the value and work ethic my community brings to their industries and businesses. The CEO of S&K Group in 2017 said, "If I had not found your community, I would have had to close my Columbus food processing warehouse."

I am representing the voice and the spirit of this Ohio Bhutanese American community in this great chamber today. Now is the time as representatives of this great state for you to please reach back to this growing community of proud Ohioans to provide the proper support at the state level. It will be an investment which will pay dividends many times over for Ohio.

Unfortunately, incidents like hate crimes, racism, and fearmongering not only discourages innovation and new businesses from being created, but they can also drive away the existing ones. At the same time, people who are struggling with mental illness are seeking appropriate help, but the state has limited resources to support culturally appropriate services. It is time for the state to recognize the need and take appropriate actions.

One of the best ways to support Bhutanese Americans in Ohio is to establish the Ohio AAPI Commission and the Office of AAPI Affairs to address these concerns appropriately. The AAPI Commission would not only represent and help in the integration of the mainstream community but also provides feedback and timely updates on issues before they reach a crisis point in our cities and towns. Currently, there are no commissions or offices which oversee the efforts within the state. 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, well-being and future success:

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

AAPI funding will help create appropriate health care services and coordination, advocate with the service providers and educate the larger community about the contribution of Bhutanese Americans to the state's growth and prosperity. My organization, the Bhutanese Community of Central Ohio, plays a key role in Central Ohio in the post resettlement of refugees, employment, housing, health care, education and connecting to the resources. We also serve as a critical

resource for many City, County and State agencies, as well as hospitals, school systems, businesses and public safety entities who interact with and support our growing community, However, the mental health and other needs have not been met adequately due to culture and language issues, past trauma, and refugee experiences. The AAPI commission will be tasked to look into the issue of these new Asian American Communities to find appropriate and fiscally responsible solutions.

An investment by Ohio to establish the Ohio AAPI Commission and the Office of AAPI Affairs will help make all Ohio communities safer, healthier and more prosperous.

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.

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