

Written Testimony for SC 2198

Submitted by Tessa Xuan, OPAWL – Building AAPI Feminist Leadership in Ohio
Testifying as Proponent

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

My name is Tessa Xuan and I am a resident of Cleveland. I have lived in Ohio since the age of 2; my family and I have called various places home including Dayton, Cincinnati, Columbus, Mason, and Sandusky. Ohio is the place that made me who I am today. I am submitting my testimony as a lifelong Ohioan and as the co-director of OPAWL, a grassroots statewide organization working to build collective power and feminist leadership in Asian, Asian American, and Pacific Islander (AAPI) women, non-binary, and trans people across Ohio.

I am writing in support of the budget amendment that creates and funds the Ohio AAPI Commission and the Office of AAPI Affairs. One of my early experiences as a community organizer was after the tragic 2014 suicide of Emilie Olsen, a 13-year-old Asian American adoptee in Southwest Ohio who suffered years of racially motivated bullying at Fairfield City Schools. Emilie's story deeply resonated with me, as someone who has navigated predominantly white spaces and the constant dehumanization of people who look like me, for my entire life. I write this testimony in Emilie's memory, and in the memory of the countless other AAPI individuals who have suffered and died after being treated as disposable, exploitable, and invisible.

With the resurgence in anti-Asian violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, the murders of six Asian women in Atlanta, and the targeted killing of Sikh workers in Indianapolis, so many of us in the Ohio Asian and AAPI community have been living in a constant state of fear and anxiety for well over a year. We fear for our elders who face violence walking in their own neighborhoods, for our children who have been called racial slurs while getting ice cream at Graeter's. We fear for our small business owners who are struggling to keep their doors open while dealing with racist, threatening phone calls and – in the case of one Dayton area restaurant – even vandalism and arson. I fear for my sisters, friends, and myself, knowing that women and girls are 2.3 times more likely to report being attacked – and hearing firsthand accounts of individuals being verbally assaulted on the Cleveland RTA, spit on while walking through downtown Columbus, and attacked with a shopping cart in Akron. Seeing reports of these incidents in Ohio and across the country have triggered memories of systemic racism and erasure that have been issues for AAPIs since the founding of the United States.

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Some of you have expressed your sympathy for our painful experiences. Some of you have said that this kind of racist abuse and violence is wrong. Words are important, and I sincerely appreciate those words – but words are not nearly enough. We need your demonstrated commitment to the safety, recovery, and resilience of the Ohio AAPI community – before a mass shooting against AAPIs happens here in our state. A recent study showed that 42% of Americans could not name a single Asian American person. This mass ignorance and lack of understanding about people of Asian descent is a root cause of the systemic violence our communities have faced.

I strongly urge you to support the amendment to fund the Ohio AAPI Commission and Office of AAPI Affairs in the state budget, as well as the following appropriations:

1. \$2 million per year in grants for community organizations that serve Asians and AAPIs in Ohio. These organizations are on the frontlines of crisis response and have been chronically underfunded and under-resourced in their crucial operations.
2. Increased funding for Refugee Program Services by \$100,000 per year.

Ohio has never acknowledged the needs of AAPI communities in its state budget, and now is the time to make our communities a priority. Governor DeWine and Lt. Governor Husted failed to fulfill their campaign promise to reestablish the Ohio AAPI Advisory Council, a body that was made up of volunteers and had no funding under the previous Governor. Now we need the Senate Finance Committee to invest appropriately to begin addressing the diverse and complicated needs of the 350,000+ AAPIs who call Ohio home. We simply can't continue being invisible in the eyes of our state government.

We desperately need significant, long-term investment in AAPI community infrastructure, community-based solutions like bystander intervention training and rapid response networks, language access, and public education about the struggles and contributions of AAPIs in American history. The above budget amendments would not fully address the complex and systemic problems we are facing, but they would be a welcome first step that is long overdue.

I urge the members of the Senate Finance Committee to support the inclusion of these amendments in the state budget, and I ask that Governor DeWine and all of our state legislators work to advocate for these amendments as well. Thank you for your time and for the opportunity to testify in support of AAPI communities.