Ohio House of Representatives

State and Local Government Committee

Testimony of Scott Piepho

Asian Services in Action, Inc.

May 22, 2019

Chairman Wiggam, Ranking Member Kelly and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee. I submit this testimony to express the opposition of Asian Services In Action, Inc. (ASIA, Inc.) to Senate Bill 22.

ASIA, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) human services organization based in Northeast Ohio with locations in Cuyahoga and Summit counties. We serve primarily immigrant and refugee populations, offering everything from early childhood programs to senior services. In addition, we operate Federally Qualified Health Centers in each county. We focus on providing culturally appropriate services and care in the native languages of clients.

As part of our overall mission to empower members of refugee and immigrant communities, we educate our communities about the political process and encourage political participation including registering as voters those refugees and immigrants who become citizens. Access to the ballot for all citizens, including new Americans who may be less proficient in English, is of paramount concern to us.

We are concerned generally about what we see as ongoing efforts cut back on the state’s election system infrastructure. It is our belief that reducing spending on our election system too often results making voting more challenging, usually in ways that disadvantage those who already experience access barriers.

The proposal to reduce staffing in polling places offers an example of how thinning out the infrastructure can negatively affect access to the ballot. Allowing reductions in the number of poll workers will take polling place staffing down to bare minimum levels. When the polling place is servicing typical voters arriving at a normal pace, that might work. But when extra demands are made on staff time, the reduced staffing will likely result in delays, backlogs, and long lines at polling places.

Ohio law, in keeping with constitutional requirements, grants accommodations to certain voters, including those who are physically disabled or illiterate. In practice, those accommodations -- found in section 3505.24 of the Ohio Revised code – are used to provide the constitutionally required accommodations of voters with limited English proficiency. Such voters have a right to either bring a helper of their choice into the voting booth, or to seek help from two poll workers, one from each party.

The accommodation law represents an exception to the default rule that each voter must ender the voting booth alone. Each voter who needs accommodation will require some measure of additional poll worker time. The law allows poll workers to require an attestation as to the disability and prohibits a helper who is the employers union official of the voter. Those qualifications and restrictions place some additional time pressures on poll workers who bear the responsibility of ensuring the integrity of the vote. In the event that a voter elects to seek help from poll workers, those two poll workers will be occupied for the time it takes to voter to complete the process.

Voters with limited English proficiency pose a particular challenge because they are often concentrated in immigrant or refugee neighborhoods. The extra time required to process an accommodation, multiplied over the number of voters needing accommodation, will slow the check-in process for the polling place, resulting in longer lines. Reducing staffing will not only make voting more time consuming and difficult, but will disproportionately affect precincts with high percentages of refugees or immigrants.

We already see long lines, even at current staffing levels, at some polling places during high turnout elections. Those lines tend to appear disproportionately in precincts that cover poorer urban neighborhoods. Any proposal that will erect more barriers to voting should be rejected on that basis. When those added barriers will disproportionately affect identifiable populations, and especially when those populations already face challenges, that disproportionate effect takes on a constitutional dimension.

When we at ASIA Inc. education new Americans about our system of government and politics, we emphasize the importance of voting. It is not only a privilege of citizenship, it is a responsibility. When a government is of the people and by the people as well as for the people, we all bear some obligation to contribute to its continued vitality. That includes, at the least, paying for the infrastructure and workforce necessary to keep it running. We urge this committee to reject the notion that our democracy should be made more cheaply when that means that it will be made less accessible.