

**Testimony of Angel Feng**  
**CT Asian Pacific American Bar Association President-Elect**  
**before the Government Administrations and Elections Committee**

**H.B. No. 6002 "AN ACT ESTABLISHING AN ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICAN  
AFFAIRS COMMISSION"**

**March 16, 2007**

Thank you Madam Chair and members of the committee for this opportunity to testify in support of proposed H.B. No. 6002. I am Angel Feng of West Hartford, and I am the President-Elect of the CT Asian Pacific American Bar Association. I worked as a legal aid lawyer for over 5 years until three weeks ago, and represented low-income Connecticut residents before the courts and agencies of the state. On the basis of this experience I urge you to establish an Asian Pacific American (APA) Affairs Commission.

I agree with the remarks made by previous speakers and the testimony of Amy Lin Meyerson. My testimony makes two points:

1. CT is experiencing an unprecedented increase of its APA population, which has unique characteristics and needs. In particular, the APA community faces language barriers in accessing the legal system.
2. An APA Affairs Commission would give the APA community a voice and a resource when accessing the CT government and courts, and would serve the CT government as a partner in identifying and addressing the needs of the APA community.

**1. CT's APA Community Growth, Characteristics and Needs.**

The growth of the APA population is increasing nationwide. Connecticut has the 8<sup>th</sup> fastest growing APA population in the United States. From 2000 to 2005, the APA population in Connecticut grew more than 30%, from approximately 84,000 to over 108,000.

APAs are one of the largest racial groups in the United States, but they are very diverse. APAs come from nearly 50 countries and ethnic groups, have different languages, practice different religions and cultural traditions.

Although many APAs are born in the United States and are fluent in English, large numbers of APAs are limited English proficient (LEP). Nearly 20% of APA individuals in CT speak English either "not well" or "not at all." In addition, there is a high correlation between APAs with limited English proficiency and poverty.

LEP individuals face increasing barriers in accessing the civil courts because there is no right to an interpreter, and there are not enough qualified interpreters.

Access to the courts impacts our fundamental notions of fairness and the foundations of our democracy. On one occasion, a Norwich resident who came from China called me regarding her divorce and custody case. She had an attorney already, but had trouble understanding the proceedings because of the lack of an interpreter. When I explained that the right to an interpreter in civil cases did not exist, she asked me how could our system be considered more fair than the communist form of government she left, if she could lose custody of her child and property rights without understanding the proceedings or telling her story.

Another barrier is the rising demand for interpreters and the lack of qualified ones. In representing a Hartford battered woman of Vietnamese descent, Legal Aid contracted the interpreting services of a West Hartford company. The only interpreter the company could provide us was from Massachusetts. As a result, the charges were much higher due to travel time and mileage fees. The diversity of the APA population and the languages spoken pose another challenge to having available interpreters at court proceedings. Faced with high charges and/or unavailability of interpreters, people will rely on friends or family members who may not be qualified to interpret and may misrepresent questions and answers.

Thus, APAs face more barriers in accessing fair judicial and administrative proceedings. Our state government and courts need to address this change and hear the voices of the growing APA population.

## **2. Establishing and APA Affairs Commission as resource for APAs and for Connecticut.**

I strongly urge you to establish an APA Affairs Commission as one way of addressing the APA community's need for access to our legal system and participation in our government. It would provide APAs a forum to voice their needs and a resource to obtain information and access to agencies and services.

For instance, in addressing language access to the judiciary, the Commission could advocate for legislation that would make the courts more accessible, such as a law mandating the right to an interpreter. At the same time, the Commission could serve as a resource in mobilizing and fostering collaboration among organizations in assisting the needs of the APA population.

The commission would also serve as an advisory body to the executive and legislative branch in making the concerns and needs of the community known to policymakers and reviewing legislation that impact the APA population.

Thus, an APA Affairs Commission would give the APA community a voice and a resource while serving the CT government as a partner in identifying and addressing the unique needs of the APA community. I urge you to support H.B. No. 6002 and establish and APA Affairs Commission. Thank you for your attention.