



State of Connecticut

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Thank you Chairman Caruso, Chairwoman Slossberg, Ranking Members and members of the Committee for the opportunity to testify today in favor of HB 6002 and the creation of an Asian Pacific American ("APA") Affairs Commission. I also want to thank the Asian Pacific American Community around the state, many of whom are here today. I would not have the opportunity to serve, and to sit here today as a member of the General Assembly, without the community's strong encouragement, support, and its hard work to create opportunity for all of us.

By creating an Asian Pacific American Affairs Commission, the General Assembly would take a tremendously important step in empowering Asian Pacific Americans in our social, economic and political life. It is a long overdue measure to address the unique and important needs and concerns of Connecticut's fastest growing community of color. Asian Pacific Americans have a long history in this state, and since we first came here, we've given all that we can to the state's businesses, schools, government institutions, and our community. In fact, we fought to save this state and this union. Joseph Pierce was a Chinese American from Connecticut who fought to preserve our nation during the Civil War, and he died a decorated civil war veteran in Meriden.

As many of you know, I am humbled and proud to be the very first Asian Pacific American to be elected at the state level in Connecticut's history. But think about that for a second – a Chinese American fought for this state and this country in our nation's civil war nearly one hundred fifty (150) years ago, and we have only just elected an Asian Pacific American at the state level in 2007? As an Asian Pacific American, I am often asked, what are you complaining about? Every day we have to answer to a myth, the "model minority stereotype," a gross distortion that leads people to think that Asian Pacific Americans are uniformly successful and well-educated, and that we face no serious discrimination. Despite the "model minority" stereotype, many Asian Pacific Americans are in desperate need of services, including mental health and physical health services; job training; English language education; and access to courts and the legal system. Asian Pacific Americans continually face bias, discrimination, and hate crimes which are often overlooked or under-reported. Ask the immigrants in your local Asian restaurant, working for subsistence wages in hot, unsafe kitchens around our state, whether success has come easy to them. Ask the many Asian Pacific American dealers at our casinos whether they would rather do something else, and the access they have to career advancement and educational opportunities. Ask the compulsive gamblers who take the bus after working a full day to gamble the night away. Ask the more than 8,000 Asian Pacific Americans who live in poverty in our state.

There is no doubt that I have had tremendous opportunities, and that my parents found success here in Connecticut. It has been my dream to serve here with you. But I have been told, even by my strongest supporters, that they didn't think I could win because of my race. I've been told that our state isn't ready to elect Asian Pacific Americans. I've been told that I cannot do what I have dreamed of doing since I was a child – to serve with all of you – because of my race. And I am sure that Asian Pacific American children around the state who share my dream are still being told the same thing. I can think of no more limiting and insidious form of discrimination than that.

You can change that by creating an Asian Pacific American Affairs Commission. Asian Pacific Americans (APAs) are one of the fastest-growing populations in the country. In 2005, according to the U.S. Census, APAs represented approximately 3.2% of the total population in Connecticut, making Connecticut the 8th 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 come from nearly 50 countries and ethnic groups, including East Asians, Pacific Islanders, Southeast Asians, South Asians and Asian-Latino Americans.¹ These groups within the APA community speak numerous languages, practice different religions and have markedly different needs and characteristics. With this tremendous APA population growth, the General Assembly now has the opportunity to partner with the APA community in identifying and addressing the APA community's unique needs. An Asian Pacific American Affairs Commission would serve as a resource to the Governor, the General Assembly, state agencies, departments, and commissions on issues relating to the social, educational, health, economic development, and civil rights concerns and interests of the APA community to adequately serve this growing population.

What will the Commission do?

The Asian Pacific American Affairs Commission will actively aid and support the Governor, the General Assembly, state agencies, departments, and commissions in developing policy initiatives, programs, and effective legislation to address issues of concern to the APA community. Through its proactive approach, the Commission will:

- submit a Commission Plan of Action before the start of each session outlining the Commission's policy focus and strategies to address key priorities;
- support state entities in providing services to the APA community in areas such as workplace justice and equality, education, job training, access to health care, mental health and addiction services, immigration, English language instruction, economic development, housing, access to courts, and civil rights;
- promote political empowerment of the APA community, including programs in areas such as voter registration, citizenship training, and voting rights;
- promote the election and appointment of APA elected officials, judges, and commissioners, and the hiring of APAs in all branches of government;
- support the state's efforts in developing international trade and cross-border economic cooperation with the countries of Asia and the Pacific Rim;
- support the state's efforts to develop effective foreign language and cultural programs for educational and economic development purposes;
- provide information and research to the General Assembly and state entities to support policy and legislative initiatives, and provide testimony to the General Assembly and state entities as an advocate on behalf of the APA community in Connecticut;
- promote cultural awareness and celebration of the contributions of APAs to Connecticut; and
- provide any other aid and support the state may need in serving the APA community and the community at large.

Key areas of concern to APAs include the following:

Education

- Up to 53.3% of APAs lack English language proficiency due to the high proportion of immigrants (about 74% of APAs in Connecticut are foreign born).
- More APAs lack a rudimentary education (3.4% have an educational level below fourth grade), as compared with only 1.6% of the total population and 0.6% of whites.

¹The diverse APA community in Connecticut includes individuals who are Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Mongolian, Taiwanese, Burmese, Cambodian, Filipino, Hmong, Indonesian, Laotian, Thai, Vietnamese, Singaporean, Malaysian, Timorese, Bruneian, Bangladeshi, Bhutanese, Indian, Indo-Caribbean, Maldivian, Nepalese, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Tibetan, Hawaiian, and other people of Asian and/or Pacific Islander descent.

- APAs comprise the largest minority group in two-thirds of Connecticut school districts, yet the efforts to increase the number of APA teachers has been lacking.
- Adult education, particularly offerings in English language instruction, is woefully inadequate, commonly at less than the 20 hours a week prescribed as educationally sound.

Economics

- Although APAs had the highest median annual household income (\$46,637), among the nation's racial groups in 1998, due to larger APA households (3.15 for APAs versus 2.47 for whites), the estimated income per household member is lower in the APA population (\$19,107 for APAs versus \$22,633 for whites).
- The number of APAs who live below the poverty level is significantly higher than the proportion of poor non-Hispanic whites (12.5% of APAs versus 8.2% of non-Hispanic whites).

Health Care:

- In 1998, 21.1% of APAs lacked health insurance coverage and could not afford health care expenses.
- The lack of culturally competent health care professionals, including hospital interpreters, is an overwhelming, ethnicity-specific obstacle to health care access resulting in low rates of health services utilization, high rates of emergency room use, and inadequacy of prenatal care.
- Gambling addiction services, smoking cessation, substance abuse services, health education and prevention are pressing, yet unmet needs.

Mental Health Services:

- The incidence of mental illness among Southeast Asians, primarily due to war trauma, has been measured to be as high as 75%.
- Language barriers, failure of public agencies to provide interpreters, and lack of cultural sensitivity cause mainstream services to be inaccessible to Southeast Asians and to other ethnic groups.

Criminal Justice and Legal Services:

- In the last six years, there has been a 350% increase in need for court interpreters.
- There is a need to increase the diversity of the judiciary, prosecutors, public defenders, court interpreters, and law enforcement officials to reflect the proportion of APAs in Connecticut.
- Victims of crime programs need culturally responsive support, particularly in cases of domestic violence and sex crimes.
- There are ongoing concerns for the rights of refugees and immigrants.

Housing:

- Although Connecticut's two casinos have attracted an influx of Asian workers, the lack of affordable housing has often forced up to 20 people to live in a single dwelling, some who must sleep in shifts.
- In 2003, applications for 1 to 4 family home loans by APAs comprised only 1.5% of government backed loans and 5.4% of conventional loans compared with 64% of government backed loans and 71.4% of conventional loans for whites.
- APAs in Connecticut comprise less than 2% of owner-occupied housing units.

Jobs:

- Contrary to the "model minority" stereotype, although APAs have the highest percentage of college graduates for any racial group, they make up less than 0.5% of corporate officers in Fortune 500 companies and less than 1.5% are Chief Executive Officers of Fortune 1000 companies.