

Committee on House Administration Subcommittee on Elections

**Written Testimony on behalf of Asian Services in Action, Inc. for the April 25, 2019
Field Hearing on Voting Rights and Election Administration in Cleveland, Ohio**

Asian Services In Action, Inc. (ASIA, Inc.)

Asian Services in Action, Inc. also known by the acronym ASIA, Inc. provides services to immigrants and refugees in Northeast Ohio. ASIA, Inc. was founded in 1995 by four women who saw a need to improve the quality of life for Asians and Pacific Islanders in Northeast Ohio. Today, the organization is the largest Asian American and Pacific Islander-focused health and social service 501(c)(3) organization in the State of Ohio. ASIA, Inc. serves thousands of individuals and families at its offices located in Cleveland and Akron, Ohio. These services include culturally and linguistically focused medical care provided through our Federally Qualified Health Center as well as wrap around social services so that each client is treated holistically according to their individual needs. ASIA, Inc. serves some of the most vulnerable members of the community - newcomers to this country who are learning how to navigate and adjust to a new environment with different rules and unfamiliar procedures. ASIA, Inc.'s mission is to reduce barriers and obstacles for new arrivals to this country and empower them to contribute to the strengthening and growth of America.

AAPI Population in Ohio

According to a 2018 report from the Ohio Development Services Agency, Ohio's Asian American community consists of more than 324,000 people. The Asian community in Ohio includes

immigrants from countries like China, Korea and India; as well as Hmong, Karen, Bhutanese, Nepali, Laotian and other refugees. The 2020 Census will hopefully provide an updated and accurate count.

Asian American Pacific Islander Civic Engagement (ACE) Network

ASIA, Inc.'s new American civic engagement project began in 2012 as part of an effort to increase Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) participation in the presidential election. This work grew into a movement to educate and push for civic participation among new American communities throughout Ohio and is now known as the ACE Network. Through the ACE Network, ASIA, Inc. has supported 29 community-based organizations, ethnic groups, and student associations to increase voter participation and civic engagement within the AAPI community across the state of Ohio. The ACE Network operates under two core values: we believe in democracy and the democratic process, and we envision a society in which all Asian American and Pacific Islanders fully participate in and have access to the democratic process. The mission of the ACE Network is to educate the community on the importance of civic participation through community-based advocacy, and to increase the overall rate of civic engagement participation among the AAPI and new Americans community through voter education, canvassing, and Election Day initiatives that provide greater AAPI and new American voter turnout.

This effort represents a significant investment of resources to increase voter turnout in the State of Ohio in the Asian American Pacific Islander community. This year ASIA, Inc. will be working with fifteen diverse partners across the state who are organizing at the grassroots level to register

and turn out new, low propensity voters. In 2018, ASIA, Inc., along with members of the ACE Network, contacted over 36,000 registered voters across the state.

Educating New Americans on Voting

For many members of the immigrant and refugee population that ASIA serves, the right to vote is a new and unfamiliar experience. A refugee, almost by definition, comes from a country where the institutions necessary to protect the freedom and safety of citizens have failed, or have never existed. As such, many of ASIA, Inc.'s clients arrived in this country with little understanding of the features of a functioning democracy. Some of ASIA's clients have not even voted in their countries of origin. So, ASIA's civic engagement team not only registers new voters, they also educate new Americans about the voting process.

Language Barriers for English Language Learners

Some members of the new American community have language challenges with limited English proficiency. The combination of voting being a new concept for the new American community plus a language challenge will exacerbate any barrier to voting so that each feature of the election process that makes voting more difficult will have a disproportionate effect on new Americans.

Increasing Access to Poll Workers

In Ohio, we are particularly concerned about what we see as ongoing efforts to cut back on the infrastructure of the election system. The most recent example of this came in 2017 when the Ohio General Assembly considered a bill that would have dropped the number of poll workers per precinct from four to two.

ASIA, Inc. opposed the bill because it would have disproportionately affected voters with limited English proficiency as well as any other voter who needed extra help casting a vote. For example, a limited English proficiency voter has the right to bring a helper into the voting booth, but that accommodation has to be approved by poll workers. With fewer poll workers, the time for getting an accommodation approval will be longer. That effect creates a barrier to voting.

Fortunately, the bill to decrease the number of poll workers did not pass. It illustrates, however, how the state of Ohio is underfunding its election infrastructure. We have also seen the number of polling places steadily cut resulting in longer lines, which appear disproportionately to affect precincts that are predominantly minority and lower income. My co-CEO tells me that his polling location has changed eight times in the last ten years. Needless to say, that kind of inconsistency makes finding a polling place that much harder for someone still adjusting to life in this country.

Voter Registration Reform

For new Americans, access to the polls can be difficult, confusing or give the impression of being designed to discourage their participation. A circumstance that shows the need for voter registration reform occurs at the intersection where an eligible new American voter has an interest in voting on Election Day and then learns that he or she cannot vote because of not being timely registered in advance of the election. Sixteen states (ME, NH, VT, CT, MI, MD, IL, IA, WI, MN, MT, ID, CO, UT, CA, HI) plus DC have same day voter registration. Same day voter registration in Ohio would eliminate this barrier for the new American voter.

Voter Purge

While ASIA, Inc. has not directly counselled a voter who was purged, we do know that some features of refugee communities are likely to make them more susceptible to being purged erroneously. First, members of these communities are at least somewhat more likely to move around, especially in the first few years after being settled here. More importantly, refugees tend to have less formal education and tend to come from societies without the democratic institutions that native-born Americans take for granted. As such, they are more likely to be confused or even intimidated by an official notice like the one that the state of Ohio sends after a period of inactivity. For those citizens still mastering English, the confusion will be more pronounced. For these reasons, we are concerned that voter purge systems will affect some new Americans who otherwise would be eligible to vote. We particularly object to the feature of Ohio's voter purge system that excludes a voter even if he can prove that he was improperly purged.

Conclusion

ASIA, Inc. applauds the Committee's efforts in traveling across the country to inquire about the current status of voter access in each state. It reflects a shared consensus that all communities within the American family should participate in civic life, including voting in elections.