

December 16, 2009

New Economy and Quality of Life Committee Testimony  
by Sook Wilkinson, Ph.D.

Chairperson

Michigan Asian Pacific American Affairs Commission (MAPAAC)

Mr. Chairman and esteemed members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak about MAPAAC.

My name is Sook Wilkinson. My husband, Todd, and I live in Bloomfield Hills. Our two adult children were born and raised in Michigan.

I'm a clinical psychologist in my day job, working as an independent practitioner and a consultant at William Beaumont Hospital.

In June of last year, I had the privilege to testify in front of this committee as the Chair of the Governor's Advisory Council on Asian Pacific American Affairs. My testimony at the time was to support HB 6172 to create Asian Pacific American Affairs Commission.

I'm delighted to be here today as the appointed chairperson of that new Commission. I'd like to thank you for your leadership and vision for passing the bill. I'm here to report on what the Commission has done and plans to do. After my presentation, the Chair of our Business Development committee, Mr. LG Almeda, will speak more in detail about how we plan to work with the state to help develop new businesses from Asian countries.

The overarching goal of our commission is to help build a greater Michigan by mobilizing the Asian Pacific American population. To make that happen, we formed four committees: Business Development, Community Development, Social & Civic Service, and Workforce Development Committees. We have 21 appointed commissioners, representing 11 Asian ethnic communities including Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Japanese, Hmong, Bangladeshi, Taiwanese, Pacific Islander, Vietnamese, and Indonesian. We're geographically diverse as well, covering regions from Marquette to Monroe, Grand Rapids to Sterling Heights.

As a commission made up of volunteer commissioners with zero dollar appropriations, as you can imagine, we have many limitations but we do have a very strong can-do spirit and approach. Our biggest asset is the human resources represented in our commissioners – their professional expertise, leadership, bi-lingual language skills, bi-cultural heritage, and valuable contacts with people in their countries of origin.

Last year, a Free Press article pointed out that Asian Americans are the fastest growing group of immigrants in Michigan. The Asian Pacific Americans are engaged in many different fields – higher education as professors, administrators, students, and staff; as small and medium size business owners; engineers; lawyers, social scientists, bio scientists, medical doctors, nurses, spiritual leaders, elected officials, bankers, musicians, artists, community volunteers, etc. There're so many human resources we can tap into in our community.

I'd like to share a story that illustrates the use of human resources for the benefit of the state of MI. I'm privileged to serve on the Northern Michigan University's Board of Trustees as a gubernatorial appointee. The university has been working on expanding their international programs to help their students become global citizens. Although they have exchange programs with many universities throughout the world, I noticed they don't have any in S. Korea. Since that's my country of origin, I offered to work with them and use my contacts to find universities NMU can work with.

In less than 6 months, NMU is very close to signing an MOU with one, and is working out the details with a second university. How was this possible? With quick phone calls to my friends who're in leadership positions, I was able to facilitate this without costing the state one penny.

This is a very small example but this kind of facilitation can be done easily by our commissioners representing 11 Asian ethnic groups.

Our plans for 2010 includes a strategic planning retreat in January to flush out the details as to how we'd carry out the charge spelled out in Governor's Executive Order and HB 6172. We have five meetings scheduled in 2010, in Detroit, Grand Rapids, Ann Arbor, and Lansing areas.

Thank you again for this opportunity.