

TESTIMONY OF ELAISA VAHNIE

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BEFORE INTERIM STUDY COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC HEALTH, BEHAVIORAL
HEALTH, AND HUMAN SERVICES**

INDIANA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

ON

**“THE STATUS OF BURMESE COMMUNITY, HEALTH DISPARITIES, AND HUMAN
SERVICES”**

OCTOBER 14, 2020

Chairperson Kirchhofer, Vice Chairperson Charbonneau, and distinguished members of the committee,

It is a great privilege and honor for me to have been given the opportunity to share and provide you with, today, the progress of the Burmese community in Indianapolis. I would like to be able to report to you the overall status of the Burmese community, the progress we have made, and also underscore the key issues identified based on several studies related to health disparities and human services in Indiana over the course of the past several months as we have gone through these unprecedented times caused by Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). Finally, I would like to be able to share and discuss what I think are actionable and policy solutions to these issues.

[Background]: America: Land of the Free, Home of the Brave. Many refugees, who flee from the dangers of their homeland, risk their lives to enter the United States in hope of a better future. The United States, known for being the world leader in responding to emerging global issues, including providing refugee protection and humanitarian assistance, has welcomed more than 3.4 million immigrants with open arms since the first Refugee Assistance Act was passed by Congress in 1975.

According to the U.S. Department of State's Refugee Processing Center, as of September 30, 2020, 987,430 refugees have been admitted to the US since 2000. These refugees come from more than 120 countries around the world. Of them 179,820, or 18.29% are from Myanmar (also known as Burma)¹. Similarly, 13,855 (nearly 14,000) or 72.82% out of 19,163 refugees from 51 countries who were directly admitted to Indiana since 2000, have been resettled in Indianapolis.

Moreover, an estimated 42% of all Burmese refugees are found to be secondary migrants. This makes a total of over 33,000 Burmese being part of this great Hoosier State while about 23,000 of them are calling Indianapolis itself their new home.

The secondary migrant number has been consistent over the past five years², indicating that a significant portion of the Burmese refugees living in Central Indiana are secondary migrants. Knowing the challenges that secondary migrants often face, it is important for organizations and stakeholders in Indiana to be prepared to assist the growing refugee population beyond initial resettlement services, in the crisis such as in this pandemic time.

[Challenges and Opportunities]: The process of resettlement presents many challenges to refugees as they begin to rebuild their lives in their new communities—often a completely new environment. Not only do they arrive with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, but they are also immediately challenged with navigating the complex systems such as the social system, legal system, education system—and health and human services. Hence, the new arrivals have just entered into a critical time period where they must identify resources available to them and begin to develop the skills necessary to integrate and become self-sufficient. Though resettlement agencies would usually be able to facilitate the basic assistance provision process in their initial stage of resettlement, a variety of challenges for the refugees' long-term integration continue. This is partly because, by design, the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program expects refugees to become self-sufficient within 3-8 months of their arrival. However, the reality is that it requires a much longer time for newcomers to integrate successfully.

For example: a study has shown that it takes Limited English Proficient (LEP) students one to two years to learn conversational English skills but approximately five to seven years to attain academic language proficiency in normal school settings³. Academic English language proficiency is a critical component of college-preparedness, and must be addressed in the community to increase post-secondary education enrollment and to improve educational attainment.

Similarly, the refugees are eligible to become US citizens only after 5 years from their arrival, but they also need to prepare, take and pass the English language and the civics test in addition to a number of other requirements and stipulations.

And most importantly, we do not want our community or families and individuals to be relying upon public assistance for a long period of time. We know that the American people have spent millions of dollars and their resources to bring us here so that we can start our new lives. We are always grateful to the American people and the US government—particularly to the citizens and the leadership of this great city and this great state—the Hoosier State. But we recognize the need to get out of the situation of being continuously depending on the taxpayers’ money as quickly as possible. And to be able to do that, we must take action. That is exactly why the Burmese American Community Institute came in to existence proactively.

[Our Response]: With a clear conviction, recognizing these challenges and opportunities, the BACI was established with a vision of ‘Education for All, A Stronger Community’ and a mission ‘To build a thriving, self-sufficient, sustainable, and integrated community through advocacy, education, and employment’. But that was a result of several years of extensive consultations and deliberation with comprehensive stakeholders, including parents, community and faith-based organizations, colleges/universities, businesses, and government agencies. Institutional development and all the service provisions we deliver reflects this process which is inclusive, open, innovative, and comprehensive.

As an ethnically and linguistically diverse group, we can’t emphasize enough on the ideas and [the values] of inclusiveness and openness across the lines of different ethnic groups from Burma. For instance, Burmese refugees comprise 8 main ethnic groups: Chin, Kachin, Shan, Karenni (or Kayar), Karen, Mon, Arakan (or Rakhaine), Bama (or Burman). Reminding ourselves of the fact that the heart of the political crisis in Burma and the very root cause of the exodus of the refugees is ethnic conflict, we ought not to fail in upholding the principles of inclusiveness, equality, openness, and celebrating diversity at every level, including in the organizational development and in providing culturally and linguistically appropriate services to the community we serve.

[Community Successes and Impact]: Because of these collaborative joint efforts —I am pleased to report to this Committee that the college going rate among the Burmese recent high school graduates has increased from 43% in 2013 to 91% this year (in 2020).

Recognizing that one of the greatest American values of the American democracy is civic participation, in the past ten years, one of our focus areas has been empowering new Americans

with security in their rights and liberties by providing English and Citizenship instruction, including rights and responsibilities education, and providing immigration related legal services. I am delighted to report to this Committee that with BACI's assistance, now thousands of Burmese and newcomers have become US citizens within the past decade, and we know that this will allow them to be able to freely and actively participate in civic matters, and exercise their rights and freedom responsibly, more fully, and meaningfully, including voting in this year's presidential election. This means they are not only becoming integrated culturally and civically, but also in their American life as a whole.

And to ensure newly resettled refugees and the Burmese community members are becoming economically self-sufficient, we have also been able to collaboratively work together with our partners in the delivery of gainful employment services, emphasizing on-the-job training, aimed at skilled workforce development that provides them the opportunity to be employed at better paying jobs, earning highly enough to get out of public assistance and sustain their family. We also provide technical assistance to business start-ups from scratch to an operational level. And I am happy to report to you that according to our 2020 summer survey, there are over 70 small businesses that have been started and are owned by Burmese community members in Indianapolis currently operating. Families are buying cars and homes. All this allows them to give back to their communities and contribute to economic growth.

[Key findings of the study and community assessment]: As much as we are happy with the progress we have made, we also understand the challenges that the Burmese and minorities groups as a whole are continuing to face, especially in the wake of COVID-19. Indiana State COVID-19 Health Disparities Task Force Committee, where I have the honor of serving as a committee member, produced reports that outline key issues, barriers, and deliverables. Another study conducted by BACI scholars —collaborated on by faculty members from Ball State University⁴, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI)⁵, and Purdue University⁶ through the BACI's Center for Research, Policy and Innovation⁷—this summer also produced a report that resonates the concerns in the former.

Key points that I would like to highlight out of these two studies' findings are:

1. Overall lack of communications and education designed to inform, increase awareness, and engage the community about COVID-19 testing, contact tracing, serology testing, insurance, protective measures and social services;
2. Similarly and more specifically, lack of availability of educational and informational materials and services in languages other than English;
3. Also the study identified widespread mistreatment or discrimination against minorities, especially targeting Asian Americans, like Burmese.

[Recommended action and Policies]: The leadership of the State, the city of Indianapolis, the health system and providers have been doing everything they possibly can. However, based on the studies, the following recommended policies and deliverables should be considered for implementation.

1. Under the leadership of the State Government, the agencies concerned should develop culturally and linguistically appropriate messages and materials to inform diverse populations about COVID-19 testing, safety, isolation, care, quarantine procedures, contact tracing, protective actions, and reducing stigma and blame;
2. The State Government and all government organizations and offices should collaborate with trusted community leaders and Community Based Organizations (CBOs) who are in and of the culture, faith and language community to develop and provide culturally and linguistically appropriate services, as they are able to do so effectively and efficiently;
3. With the leadership of the State Government, the policies should ensure diverse and inclusive procedures through a cohesive, comprehensive and open process; this becomes systemic change put in place at every level of government, as well as at hospitals, providers, nonprofits, and businesses not just in an effort to address issues around the COVID-19 pandemic, but also this should be put in place at health and human services, education, and all sectors that serve and engage with minority populations;
4. To establish a mechanism for effective implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of all deliverables is put in place.
5. With the leadership of the State, increased funding for public health infrastructure, programs, and human services so that they can continue to deliver the vital services;
6. Finally and importantly, we are grateful and proud of the great leadership of the state and the city on many fronts, at the same time we would like reiterate the need for strengthening of a policy environment in which everyone is treated the same, with equality, respect, and dignity;

I would like to conclude my opening statement by thanking all our partners and stakeholders: the Office of Refugee State Coordinator, TB/Refugee Health at Indiana State Department of Health, Marion County Department of Health, Hospitals, Providers, health professionals, and frontline workers for doing everything they possibly can to protect all of us and to keep us safe. Also my thanks to other collaborators: the School Districts [especially Perry Township Schools], Higher Educational Institutions, the City of Indianapolis, [local resettlement agencies], and all our neighbors for their partnership and support in our continuing effort to ensure that the Burmese and newcomers are becoming integrated, successful, and contributing members of this great Hoosier State and the United States of America.

Thank you again Chairperson, Vice Chairperson and members of the committee for this opportunity and for your leadership.

¹Data obtained from the U.S. Department of State's RPC as of September 30, 2020 and data analysis is done by the author, Burmese American Community Institute, RPC accessed October 10, 2020.

²BACI Upward College Summer Scholars Study: U.S. Refugee Resettlement and Secondary Migrants, August 5, 2020

³See Office of English Language Learning & Migrant Education, Indiana Department of Education Nov 18, 2010

⁴Mengxi Zhang, Ph.D., CRPI Affiliate, Assistant Professor of Health Science, Ball State University collaborated with a group of scholars who studied on the topic of COVID-19 Impact on the Burmese Community, with a focus on Young Adult Developmental Outcomes.

⁵Dr. Jessica Euna Lee, Ph.D, affiliate of CRPI and Assistant Professor at IUPUI, served as research supervisor to a group of scholars that conducted a study on U.S. Refugee Resettlement and Secondary Migrants and Dr. Megan S. McHenry, MD, MS, FAAP, CRPI Affiliate, Assistant Professor of Pediatrics, Indiana University School of Medicine worked with a group that studied the topic of Improving Child Healthcare for Burmese Families by Designing Simulations (Culturally and Linguistically).

⁶Xiang Zhou, Ph.D. CRPI Affiliate, Assistant Professor in Counseling Psychology, Purdue University supervised a study on College Persistence among the Burmese College students. Additional information of the study, accessible here: <https://thebaci.org/2020/08/08/college-going-rate-among-burmese-americans-increased-to-91-while-maintaining-96-9-college-persistence-rate/>

⁷More information about CRPI accessible here: <https://thebaci.org/2020/08/17/baci-launched-center-for-research-policy-and-innovation-crpi/>