



# The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

## Asian American and Pacific Islanders Commission

### Afghan Listening Session

Lowell, Massachusetts

March 2, 2024

#### ***Executive Summary***

This report synthesizes pressing concerns highlighted by community advocates and members, underscoring urgent areas for the AAPI Commission's focus on the Afghan community and the refugee populations. Through dynamic community engagement, we've identified pivotal challenges across resettlement, education, support, health, transportation, cultural integration, employment, and housing. Addressing these issues demands targeted actions to foster community resilience and empowerment.

#### ***Event Summary***

The Massachusetts AAPI Commission held a listening session with the Afghan community (members with Pashto, Dari, and some Hindi speaking members present). This event was organized in partnership with the Massachusetts Baptist Multicultural Ministries (MBMM) and the ACE Center for New Americans, reflecting a collaborative effort to engage with and understand the unique challenges faced by the Afghan community in Massachusetts.

The event played a pivotal role in making the voices of the Afghan community heard, as members of their community shared their experiences, concerns, and hopes. With representatives from the Asian Caucus, Tackey Chan and Vanna Howard, Chair Gary Chu and Commissioners Moana Bentin, Meena Bharath, and Ekta Srinivana. We were additionally joined by the City of Lowell's head of housing, the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association, City of Lowell DEI Officer Ineabelle Dominguez, and Pollard Memorial Librarian. Multiple organizations came together to provide support, resources, and aid to those who attended.

#### ***Key Issues and Recommendations***

- **Develop and advocate for affordable housing solutions** to address the dire need for quality, stable housing.
- **Expand educational support and resources** for English language learning and recognition of international credentials.
- **Enhance long-term support services** to provide continuous assistance beyond initial resettlement.
- **Establish clear, accessible communication channels** between new arrivals and health services, including culturally competent care.
- **Advocate for employment programs** that recognize and utilize the skills of immigrants, facilitating meaningful job opportunities.
- **Create resources and guidance** for navigating the U.S. health insurance system tailored for non-English speakers.

- **Implement mental health support initiatives**, focusing on community engagement and support for vulnerable groups.

### ***Community Needs Highlighted and Addressed***

- **Resettlement and Housing Challenges**
  - An MBMM Refugee Advocate spotlights acute resettlement issues, notably the scarcity of quality, affordable housing. High rents force community members into substandard living conditions and search for long-term housing solutions.
- **Education Barriers**
  - Language barriers significantly hinder the integration of new Americans from the Afghan community. Enhancing scholarship opportunities and resources for English language learning in community colleges is critical. We need to advocate for expanded educational support to bridge these gaps.
- **Support Systems**
  - Existing short-term services need to meet long-term needs. A comprehensive approach to support, encompassing both immediate and sustained assistance, is essential. There is an urgent need to work with community groups and nonprofits to bridge this gap, ensuring continuous support for community members.
- **Health Communication Gaps**
  - More effective communication channels between new arrivals and community health organizations are needed. Instances of blocked communication by case workers exacerbate these challenges. Establishing robust, accessible communication channels is imperative for ensuring health equity.
- **Transportation and Cultural Differences**
  - New arrivals need more transportation services, compounded by cultural differences in healthcare provision. Need to advocate for culturally competent healthcare services and improved transportation options to ensure accessible care and support.
- **Employment and Skill Recognition**
  - The Afghan community needs help with job acquisition and skill recognition. Highlighted cases, like a national soccer coach and surgeons trained by Americans, underscore the need for personalized support and recognition of international credentials. Developing programs that acknowledge and utilize skills is essential, facilitating meaningful employment opportunities.
- **Health Insurance Navigation**
  - Navigating the U.S. health insurance system presents a formidable challenge for new immigrants. Personal accounts reveal a profound need for guidance through these processes.
  - Work with partners to develop resources and support systems to demystify health insurance for new arrivals.
- **Mental Health Concerns**
  - The mental health of community members, particularly among Afghan women, is a significant concern. Isolation and financial stress contribute to mental health issues. Initiatives to engage and support these community members are crucial for their well-being.