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Testimony by the Arab-American Family Support Center

New York City Council Committee on Finance
Council Member Justin Brannan, Chair

March 2nd, 2022

I would like to begin by thanking the Chair Brannan, members of the Committee on Finance, and the New York City Council for holding this hearing and inviting community-based organizations to testify. My name is Lana Khamash, and I am the Priority Areas Specialist & External Engagement Manager at the **Arab-American Family Support Center (AAFSC)**. I am honored to testify today alongside the Asian American Federation on behalf of marginalized immigrant and refugee families throughout New York City.

At the **Arab-American Family Support Center (AAFSC)**, we have dedicated ourselves to creating an inclusive safe haven for immigrants and refugees since **1994**. We promote well-being, prevent violence, and prepare families to learn, work, and succeed. Our organization serves all who are in need, but with over **27** years of experience, we have gained cultural and linguistic competency serving New York's growing AMEMSA (Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim, and South Asian) communities. As a culturally and linguistically competent, trauma-informed organization, AAFSC has expanded to offer services at **13** service locations across each of the five boroughs. Our staff speak **36** languages – including Arabic, Bangla, Hindi, Spanish, and Urdu – enabling us to serve populations that mainstream providers struggle to reach.

As immigrants and refugees across NYC grapple with the long-term ramifications of the COVID-19 public health crisis, ranging from heightened discrimination and hate crimes to acute financial insecurity, they are turning to trusted, community-based resources like **AAFSC** for support. Over the past year, the **AAFSC Research Institute** has challenged the mainstream tendency to paint AAPI and AMEMSA communities in broad strokes through community-based data collection and disaggregation, working diligently to understand their nuanced needs. Over the course of our needs assessments, we identified that demand for support in the immigrant and refugee communities we serve has reached an all-time high. There has been a **625%** increase in the proportion of households reporting a need for mental health support over the past **2 years**. Similarly, food insecurity in our communities has reached an unprecedented level, with **44%** of our Needs Assessment respondents reporting inadequate access to food. Alarming, **66%** also reported at least one unmet health-related need.

In response, **AAFSC** has worked to scale our initiatives, offering uninterrupted service delivery throughout COVID-19 and serving **10,000** New Yorkers in **2021** alone. **AAFSC** has distributed over **\$550,000** in Emergency Relief Funds during the pandemic, offering an essential lifeline to thousands of beneficiaries facing acute food and housing insecurity. Further, positioned as a unique and linguistically accessible resource within each of the five Family Justice Centers, **AAFSC** served **2,029** survivors of domestic violence across all **5** boroughs in **2021**. Also over the last year, **AAFSC** ramped up our efforts in the Adult Education and Literacy Program, carrying out a **119%** increase in enrollment over the pandemic and serving **711** immigrant and refugee learners.

Through these and our full range of other wraparound programs, the **Arab-American Family Support Center** continues to rise to the challenge, serving as an essential safety net even as we have faced budget cuts. However, as the external landscape introduces further challenges such as the recommencement of evictions and the alarming prevalence of hate crimes, current allocations will fall short of ensuring we can meet the needs of NYC's most marginalized. It is critical that the City Council honors existing budget contracts and invests in supporting community-based organizations throughout New York City. As the demand for linguistically accessible and culturally responsive programs like ours grows, our services are consistently at capacity, with limited options for external referral destinations that share these unique, but deeply in-demand competencies. We are committed to remaining a resource for AAPI and immigrant/refugee communities, but we cannot do it without the city's ongoing support.

AAFSC joins the Asian American Federation in respectfully requesting that the Committee expand funding for Citywide Initiatives that ensure more AAPI/immigrant-led and serving groups like the **Arab-American Family Support Center** are adequately funded to support those with the most pressing needs. In particular:

- We request that the AAPI Community Support Initiative be funded at **\$20m**. This fiscal year, **AAFSC's** allocation through this emerging initiative has been essential as we responded to the rise in hate crimes against AAPI communities and worked diligently to mitigate the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these households.
- We request increased investment in the Adult Literacy Pilot Initiative. For the first time last year, **AAFSC's** allocation from this initiative has enabled us to make critical investments to our long-underfunded Adult Education & Literacy Program to ensure that the immigrant and refugee learners we serve have access to the resources they need to thrive.
- We request a new **\$30m** investment in BIPOC-led and BIPOC-serving mental health providers and services to address anti-Asian hate and violence by funding those who are already working in our communities. In **2021**, **AAFSC** offered direct mental health counseling to **114** youth and adults over **1,247** sessions. However, as our agency is one of the only providers offering free mental health counseling in AAPI languages like Bangla, Arabic, and Urdu, we receive hundreds of external referrals and often have an extensive waitlist.
- We request that initiatives that center the well-being and empowerment of marginalized communities are prioritized and increased in the budget for the upcoming year. These include DoVE, the Cultural Immigrant Initiative, the Immigrant Survivors of Domestic Violence Initiative, the Young Women's Leadership Development Initiative, and Access Health.
- Finally, we request that City funding solicitations and decisions prioritize cultural-competency and language accessibility.

Amid the landscape of heightening discrimination, hate crimes, and social isolation, AAPI and AMEMSA communities are seeking out trusted community-based resources now more than ever. We hope we can count on City Council's continued support to ensure that we can remain an accessible resource to the immigrant and refugee communities who have come to rely on **AAFSC** after **27** years of service.

Thank you for your attention. As always, the **Arab-American Family Support Center** stands ready to work with you in ensuring the most vulnerable among us can thrive.