

March 27, 2024

Chair Hodan Hassan
100 Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr Boulevard.,
St Paul, MN 55155

Dear Chair Hassan and Members of the House Economic Development Finance and Policy Committee,

My name is Ishwari Rajak. I am a woman and an Asian immigrant. I am writing this letter in support of HF4773 funding for small businesses. I am originally from Nepal and currently live with my husband in Northeast Minneapolis. I came to the US in 2013 and, after graduating with master's degrees from Minnesota State University, Mankato, moved to the Twin Cities in 2016. I have over 20 years of professional office work experience, including working with nonprofits like the Minnesota Women's Consortium, League of Women Voters Saint Paul, and Power of People Leadership Institute in North Minneapolis, forming alliances with other nonprofits in the cities.

In early 2019, I challenged myself to start my own microbusiness, Ishu's Himalayan Foods LLC, after noticing very few Nepali female entrepreneurs in the cities, especially in the food scene. I was unable to find any Nepali cooking instructors despite Nepali food being exceptionally popular. So, I started teaching Nepali cooking classes in collaboration with co-ops, community education, and St. Paul Community College. I branched out to selling products influenced by my Nepali culture, such as achar/chutneys, spice kits, lentil kits, and chocolates with spices. We started selling at farmers' markets, pop-up markets in the Twin Cities, and neighborhood events in Northeast Minneapolis. Now, I am a cooking instructor and sell products as a cottage food producer.

I run my microfood business along with my husband as an assistant and occasionally receive help from my friends. I invested all my savings to start the business in 2019. My business is also mostly seasonal, from May to Oct/Nov, with sporadic winter cooking classes. In 2020, as I prepared for my first full season of business, the world shut down because of COVID-19. All my classes were canceled, and the regulations on selling

food at farmers' markets were so restrictive that it became challenging to sell food. In 2020, my business generated no revenue, and the consumable inventories had to be discarded. My business didn't qualify for any relief funds from the government for one reason or another. In this hardship, CAAL was the only resource that I could turn to, and the Stronger Together grant has helped restore faith in my business. I used a portion of it to pay myself, my assistant, and helpers either in cash or in other forms, which has helped and will continue to help kick-start the business again this season. It is good to know that there is support from organizations and lawmakers to pick up when some of us fall down or when times are hard.

Running a microbusiness single-handedly with a family member is sometimes physically exhausting, isolating, and mentally tiring. Many times, I even question my zest for running a business. Despite the struggles, teaching has been one of the most mentally satisfying 'jobs' I have ever had in my 25+ year career. I simply love teaching and watching people's joy when they taste my food/products. Many young children, including a 5-year-old, have come back to my classes looking forward to more fun and building on their cooking skills. Many adult participants have reported making the 'best curries of their lives' and 'making Momos become a part of their Christmas ritual'.

I know that many people in my community are struggling with operating and starting their own businesses, and this is their only chance to live a life with a stable income. I want them to have a chance to access help for their lives in Minnesota, just like I did. I urge Senate Jobs and Economic Development to consider this bill seriously.

Best,

Ishwari Rajak
2950 Ulysses St. NE,
Minneapolis, MN 55418

March 27, 2024

Chair Hodan Hassan
100 Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr Boulevard.,
St Paul, MN 55155

Dear Chair Hassan and Members of the House Economic Development Finance and Policy Committee,

My name is Nhia Xiong, and I am the owner of MadebyNhia LLC (MBN). As a first-generation Hmong woman, I embody multiple roles including that of a mother, daughter, wife, and self-taught entrepreneur. I write this letter in support of HF4773, the funding bill for Asian Minnesotan entrepreneurs, understanding firsthand the challenges of starting a business.

When I embarked on my entrepreneurial journey, I lacked the knowledge required to operate a business. Despite making numerous mistakes, the experience brought forth invaluable rewards. Nonprofits like CAAL have played a pivotal role in my journey, believing in my entrepreneurial aspirations. As an Asian individual, CAAL became my go-to organization for assistance. Through the Stronger Together fund, I was able to nurture and expand my business, marking not only a significant professional accomplishment but also personal growth.

MadebyNhia stems from various aspirations in my life: Firstly, to honor the voices of those who mentored me during my formative years; secondly, to instill in my children a pride in their Hmong identity and grassroots heritage, ensuring they never lose sight of their roots; and finally, to express gratitude to my parents, who toiled tirelessly to provide me with the opportunities I have today.

CAAL's proposal has the potential to transform the lives of small business owners, particularly those of Asian and women entrepreneurs. Many individuals in these communities encounter barriers, lack confidence and essential knowledge, and struggle to secure the necessary funds to realize their business ideas. This appropriation promises direct financial assistance, knowledge support, and the encouragement

needed to empower more Asian-owned businesses, like mine, to pursue the American Dream.

Best regards,

Nhia Xiong

7799 ideal ave S,

Cottage Grove, MN 55016

March 27, 2024

Chair Hodan Hassan
100 Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr Boulevard.,
St Paul, MN 55155

Dear Chair Hassan and Members of the House Economic Development Finance and Policy Committee,

My name is Eve Vang, the owner of Femelle Spirit, a popup boutique in the Twin Cities. I am writing this letter in support of HF4773, funding for Asian Minnesotan businesses. As a Hmong American woman, I have been selling my boho urban chic clothing and accessories at venues such as Cafe Astoria, Dual Citizen Brewery, and various festivals and markets, in addition to operating online. I initiated this business with the aim of introducing the Hmong boho look to the mainstream market while empowering women through fashion. However, I have encountered challenges in securing capital to expand and brand my style and inventory. Consequently, I have dedicated all of my disposable income, after covering my basic essentials from my job as a waitress, to gradually build my business. Moreover, balancing my time between my job and managing the boutique has been demanding, often requiring me to spend nights and weekends working on my website, engaging on social media platforms, tagging and branding my pieces, setting up and selling at my popups, and fulfilling online orders.

Running my business entails managing various aspects, where time is of the essence. Despite my efforts, I continue to navigate the dual responsibilities of my job and boutique. Marketing and gaining followers pose additional challenges, as I strive to understand how to effectively reach my target audience and convert engagements into transactions. Furthermore, investing in marketing and advertisements is crucial yet financially burdensome. However, CAAL's grant has played a pivotal role in sustaining my business amid these challenges.

I express a wish for more resources, particularly in three key areas: 1) access to capital, which would facilitate inventory management and finance marketing materials and advertisements; 2) avenues to effectively reach and engage customers; and 3) education on online marketing strategies.

CAAL advocates for women entrepreneurs who contribute significantly to economic sustainability and empowerment within the Asian community. This bill aligns with their mission, aiming to provide vital support to individuals like myself. I implore you to consider this letter as a testament to the importance of the bill and its objectives. Its passage would not only aid my peers and community in their growth but also foster the development of sustainable entrepreneurship.

In closing, I urge you to reflect on the following quote: "Women hold up half the sky." Women are integral to the workforce and are increasingly making strides in the entrepreneurial arena. Supporting women entrepreneurship not only benefits the economy but also nurtures the power of choice, self-sustainability, and talent.

Best,

Eve Vang
787 Hampden Ave N, Unit 113,
Saint Paul MN 55114

March 27, 2024

Chair Hodan Hassan
100 Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr Boulevard.,
St Paul, MN 55155

Dear Chair Hassan and Members of the House Economic Development Finance and Policy Committee,

My name is PaajFuab Xyooj, also known as Pang Foua Xiong. I am presenting this testimony in support of HF4773, which aims to provide funding for Asian women entrepreneurs. I am a humanities facilitator, cultural and language interpreter/translator, voice talent, project management consultant, and thought partner in organizational and systemic change. Additionally, I offer small business technical assistance to fellow entrepreneurs, particularly focusing on Hmong women, elder creatives, and farmers for whom English is not their first language. Although I currently reside in New Brighton, my heart remains in the Frogtown-Rondo neighborhood, where I was born and raised, and where my family still resides.

As a descendant of Southeast Asian Indigenous Hmong refugees, my journey is intertwined with the shared narrative of resilience, collective action, and perseverance inherent in Asian women entrepreneurs and most BIPOC women. My heritage and experiences as a first-generation Hmong American woman, mother, auntie, sister, and partner not only shape my identity but also enrich my professional life. They enable me to assist others in navigating and gaining deeper insights into creating culturally sensitive and accessible solutions and systems.

Professionally, these experiences and roles have never been absent. While I have learned to balance the needs and expectations placed upon me, I have also struggled to prioritize my own wellness and well-being. I have often found myself pulled into multiple situations due to my familiarity with and ability to manage such demands. While this

experience has taught me balance and boundaries, it has also underscored the challenges of prioritizing self-care when the needs of others outweigh one's own.

As a mother, caregiver, and professional, I continue to face numerous challenges, particularly navigating linguistic barriers and systemic exclusion. However, CAAL provides resources and support to help overcome these ongoing hardships.

I advocate for funding not simply as a request for assistance, but as an invitation to participate in transformative and collaborative action. By investing in our communities, we can uplift families for generations to come, fostering culturally rich and innovative solutions that contribute to Minnesota's economic success. This investment celebrates and acknowledges the contributions of communities often overlooked in mainstream narratives.

Furthermore, this support extends beyond financial aid; it is a recognition of our inherent value and contributions to Minnesota, and a commitment to nurturing diversity, fostering inclusion, and championing the dreams of those, like our ancestors, who seek a safe and prosperous home, which is leading our next generation's improvement in their lives.

CAAL has provided pathways for myself, my children, and many others like me. I am grateful to participate in CAAL's efforts to amplify our voices and experiences, and to give back to those who are furthest displaced from opportunities and resources.

Thank you for your consideration and commitment.

Sincerely,

Pang Foua Xiong / PaajFuab Xyooj

2580 Oriole Ln,

Saint Paul, MN 55112

March 27, 2024

Chair Hodan Hassan
100 Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr Boulevard.,
St Paul, MN 55155

Dear Chair Hassan and Members of the House Economic Development Finance and Policy Committee,

My name is Matha Vang. I am a first-generation Hmong American woman. I have my Masters in Business Administration specialization in Project Management. Recently, I am an entrepreneur, the owner and founder of Chanior Posh Paws.

I am writing this letter to support HF4773, the bill to provide a one-time appropriation of \$1 million to CAAL to help support Asian Minnesotan women entrepreneurs in Minnesota.

To understand my struggle as a small business owner, you have to understand the way I grew up. I grew up with a single mother raising a family of 7 children in Minneapolis, Minnesota. My mother came over to America with my father and 3 children in 1989, after many years living in refugee camps and escaping the Secret War in Southeast Asia.

Being the first-generation, I didn't grow up with a lot of financial stability. My father wasn't around dealing with mental illness he suffered from the secret war and my mother pushed through her physical challenges every day, fighting Multiple Sclerosis. She had very few good days, she was able to crawl herself upstairs to cook and put food on the table. And some bad days, my mom would sit on the ground of the living room floor with projects to fill the day. Projects from filling stuffed toy animals with sand, hand stitching Hmong patterns to make traditional clothings, and weaving plastic strips together to make baskets of all sizes. I was very thankful to witness her strength and ambitious mindset.

As an entrepreneur, I didn't realize how much I was going to struggle. When I started my business, I didn't have a financial or business inheritance, pre-existing client list, stable professional relationships, nor a board of advisors passed down to me to seek out business advice. Like many others, I did not have any options. It was up to me to figure it out on my own and learn from my mistakes. And did I make mistakes, I made a lot of mistakes as a new and first-generation entrepreneur. I charged my personal credit card to start up my business, for example paying for federal and state legal business documents. It took me two years of savings to pay back my credit card. Didn't know about quarterly taxes, so I had to pay back with penalties and fees. Spent over a year on market research. Still going through many drafts to define a well-defined business plan. Today, I am learning how to build trust and relationships with my business market.

Chanior Posh Paws was founded out of my love for my Hmong culture and my dogs named Chanel and Dior. The name Chan-ior, a combination of my dogs' name: the beginning Chanel and the ending of Dior's name. I made pet accessories and products for Chanel. Since I love wearing Hmong clothes, I handmade Chanel some Hmong designed products. I wanted to make her something unique that you couldn't find anywhere else. When I shared pictures of what I made on my personal social media and surprisedly, people also wanted them for their pups. This was how my entrepreneur journey started, and Chanior Posh Paws was born.

At Chanior Posh Paws, it is our mission to provide heartfelt pet products that are high-quality, pet friendly products for you and your pets. We offer Hmong Inspired pet essentials products for both dogs and cats, including walking bags, pet ID tags, pet harnesses, collars, leashes, and poop bag carriers.

Organization such as CAAL has helped people like me get the resources, connections and education we need to build ourselves up. Asian Americans woman face many barriers to starting and expanding their businesses, despite making up more and more of Minnesota's entrepreneurs. This bill would provide the Asian American women business community with direct financial support, technical assistance with financial institutions, a peer network of Asian Minnesotan women entrepreneurs, and so much more.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Matha Vang

Owner of Chanior Posh Paws

9514 Bluegill Rd

Woodbury, MN 55125

Email: ChaniorPoshPaws@gmail.com

The logo for Chanior POSH PAWS features the word "Chanior" in a large, pink, cursive script font. Below it, the words "POSH PAWS" are written in a smaller, blue, sans-serif, all-caps font.