



Karen Organization of Minnesota

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EIN: 30-0438142

Mission: To enhance the quality of life for all refugees from Burma in Minnesota

15 March 2022

Chair Rob Ecklund
Labor, Industry, and Veterans Affairs Committee
Minnesota House of Representatives
409 State Office Building
Saint Paul, MN 55155

Dear Chair Ecklund and Members of the Labor, Industry, and Veterans Affairs Committee:

I am writing on behalf of the Karen Organization of Minnesota to express our support of the Department of Labor and Industry’s request to increase funding for the Labor Education Advancement Program (LEAP) Grants. KOM has been a recipient of LEAP funds since 2020 to support our Apprenticeship & Manufacturing Ready Program.

The Apprenticeship & Manufacturing Ready (AMR) Program was created by the Karen Organization of Minnesota and Roseville Adult Learning Center with a goal to prepare people of color—particularly immigrants, refugees, and women—for apprenticeships and careers in the construction trades. KOM and RALC offer our **core program**, an eight-month course including both AMR content and an opportunity to earn an adult high school diploma; and our **summer intensive program** for higher-literacy participants, which is centered on employability and employment readiness modules from the core program. This program is mostly funded through a DEED Pathways to Prosperity Grant, but DLI’s LEAP Grant has been an important supplemental funding source to add more recruitment and retention supports for people entering registered apprenticeships.

Registered apprenticeships are heralded as an opportunity for jobseekers to earn money while learning valuable skills that lead to well-paying jobs. However, these apprenticeships can be intimidating for people who have few role models in the field. As the state’s workforce becomes more diverse, we need to invest in programs that support immigrants, refugees, and women to succeed in registered apprenticeships. With funding from the LEAP Grant, KOM has increased staff time to recruit participants through direct contact in the community, encouraging people from nontraditional backgrounds to see themselves working in the trades. LEAP Grant funding has also allowed our staff to spend more time working with participants after they complete our AMR training as they apply for apprenticeship programs. This has been especially helpful in the past two years, as the pandemic has caused delays both for employers to be able to bring on new apprentices and for participants who needed to take a break from job searching to care for their families. Because of these delays, we are still supporting several AMR graduates from 2020 and 2021 who are seeking apprenticeships while also supporting a new cohort of students in our 2021-2022 program.



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While this funding has been useful, the LEAP grant is currently only able to support about 10 hours per week of our staff time. With larger grants, we could reach more participants, provide more job coaching and financial education, and offer support with childcare, transportation, or emergency expenses. We are especially supportive of DLI's proposal to add more apprenticeship retention services, as we have seen some participants drop out of apprenticeship programs because of their families' needs or because they felt like they didn't belong. Having mentors from the field and a job counselor could provide the continued support that apprentices need to succeed in their programs.

Thank you for your past support of the LEAP program and for your consideration of this proposal to meaningfully increase the impact of these funds.

Sincerely,

Alexis Walstad
Co-Executive Director