



## MEMORANDUM IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE FILE 1712

Date: February 27, 2023

To: MN Legislature

From: Women's Initiative for Self-Empowerment

RE: HF 1712

As the executive director of a youth-serving organization I wanted to take this opportunity to encourage you to support HF 1712 that will result in increased funding for youth intervention programs in MN. Our organization works exclusively with immigrant and refugee girls, women and individuals on the feminine gender spectrum, most of whom are English language learners, in the areas of education, financial literacy, gender-based violence prevention, leadership development and life skills acquisition. Our programs help participants achieve academic success at the middle and high school levels, and continue to support them in post-secondary education and beyond.

### *Situation Facing Immigrant/Refugee Youth*

Refugee families have experienced complex trauma from violence/extreme poverty and other factors in their home country and enroute to their new home in MN. Trauma can impact a student's ability to concentrate, memory and follow-through, sleep, eating habits and mood. This in turn creates obstacles to learning and adjusting to a new culture and environment. Parents' trauma impacts their ability to parent their children, navigate new systems, access appropriate medical and mental health treatment, and function in their daily lives. Trauma may also be exhibited through physiological symptoms such as pain, digestive issues, headaches, insomnia, breathing issues, high blood pressure, racing heart, and mobility. It is important for these students to have opportunities to improve their mental health and wellness through culturally responsive psycho-social development, skill building and trauma-informed activities.

The girls and women who participate in WISE' programs are resilient and desiring of an education. They welcome opportunities to develop their leadership skills and explore careers they never even knew existed. They come from countries where girl's education is underfunded and/or not encouraged beyond elementary or middle school. For some of them, it is actually very dangerous to pursue an education as a female.

For WISE' post-secondary students, they are the first in their families to attend college. Because they still live at home, they are a role model for their siblings and they contribute to the

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household income. Once they have graduated from college, a number of them have purchased homes for their parents and siblings. This lifts not only their own family out of poverty, but as more and more students in their community graduate from college, it lifts their entire community.

*Increased Funding*

WISE has been asked by three immigrant/refugee serving schools to provide its Girls Getting Ahead in Leadership and Healthy Relationships programs at their sites: El Colegio in Minneapolis, and Hmong College Prep Academy and Hope School in St. Paul. The agency has also developed some parent workshops specifically for the recently settled Afghan families with a focus on understanding and coping with trauma and how it presents itself in adults, youth and children.

If HF 1712 is passed and our agency were to receive some of those funds, we would be able to serve more girls and young women from the most recent Afghan and Ukrainian families who have settled in the Twin Cities. We could expand our program to more schools and community sites in Minneapolis and the greater metro area. Presently we are working with sites in St. Paul only as we need additional staff to expand our programming.

We unequivocally support increased funding for youth intervention programs in MN as stated in HF 1712.

Respectfully,

*Pamela R. Zeller*

Pamela Zeller, Executive Director