

**Written Testimony from Manavi, South Asian Mental Health Awareness (SAMHAJ), and South Asian American Leaders of Tomorrow (SAALT) for The New Jersey Governor's Blue Ribbon Advisory Panel on Immigrant Policy**

**December 10, 2007**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony to the Governor's Blue Ribbon Advisory Panel on Immigrant Policy. Our three organizations conduct education, provide services, and engage in advocacy to highlight issues affecting the South Asian community in New Jersey.

Of the 2.5 million South Asians living in the United States, approximately 185,000 live in New Jersey.<sup>1</sup> The four largest South Asian groups in the state are Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Sri Lankan. In fact, Indians alone comprise about 35% of the total Asian population statewide in New Jersey. South Asians are primarily concentrated in five counties in the state: Middlesex, Hudson, Bergen, Morris, and Somerset Counties.

While many South Asians in New Jersey live comfortably, there are growing segments of the population facing challenges and obstacles that include limited English proficiency, lower income levels, and lack of access to basic services and benefits. Moreover, as South Asians possess a range of immigration statuses, immigration issues have a significant impact on the community.

The following statistics illustrate some of the often overlooked factors that lead to the marginalization of many South Asians within the state:

- *Income and Poverty:* Many South Asians in New Jersey do not meet the average income level and struggle in poverty to make ends meet. In Hudson County, for example, incomes for South Asians are up to one-third lower than the county average.<sup>2</sup> Statewide, one-fifth of the total Bangladesh population lives in poverty and Pakistanis have lower incomes levels than the state average.<sup>3</sup>
- *Limited English Proficiency:* Over one-third of South Asians in New Jersey report that they speak English "not well" or "not at all." More than half of all seniors within each South Asian group are limited English proficient (LEP).<sup>4</sup> South Asian students are now among the top ten student groups with the highest LEP enrollment statewide. Specifically, Gujarati LEP students ranked fifth on the list and Urdu LEP students ranked eighth.<sup>5</sup>
- *Immigration Status:* Over three-quarters of the South Asian population in New Jersey is foreign-born.<sup>6</sup> Many within the community are also living in society's shadows as undocumented immigrants.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Summary File 1. Figures calculated based on race alone.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Summary Files 2 and 4. Figures calculated based on race alone and in combination.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census 2000, Summary Files 1 through 4. Figures calculated based on race alone or in combination.

<sup>5</sup> State of New Jersey Department of Education, Bureau of Bilingual/ESL Education. *2006-2007 Languages with Highest LEP Statewide Enrollment* table.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

With this backdrop in mind, we raise three primary concerns in this testimony, including:

- *The Need for Linguistic and Cultural Access to Benefits, including Legal and Mental Health Services:* Without adequate linguistic and cultural access to government services and benefits, many South Asians are unable to receive basic resources. For example, many South Asian survivors of domestic violence cannot avail themselves of legal information or the court system. Moreover, South Asians with mental health needs face obstacles in seeking assistance if the impact of cultural stigma is not understood. And victims of crime face challenges in reporting information to the police.
- *Increase in Bias, Harassment, and Anti-Immigrant Sentiment:* The steady rise in racial tensions, coupled with the increased xenophobic atmosphere following September 11<sup>th</sup>, have had a tangible effect on minimizing the sense of safety and belonging on the part of the South Asian community in New Jersey. South Asians, particularly Sikhs and Muslims, continue to be harassed and assaulted for perceived connections with terrorism. South Asians have reported property damage and vandalism to restaurants, convenience stores, and to mosques, gurdwaras and temples, as well as employment discrimination at workplaces.

SAALT has been tracking incidents of bias affecting South Asians in New Jersey. In February 2003, for example, seventh-grader Kabir Singh who wore a turban was hit twice on his head at his school in Marlboro while in school. As a result of the attack, he suffered injuries that left him bedridden for weeks.

In August 2006, at a rally to protest incidents of police brutality in Edison, immigration agents took Raj Parikh into custody as he was about to exercise his right to free speech and address the audience. In addition, the group of South Asians who attended the rally were met by counter-protesters who made anti-immigrant and racist slurs such as, “How many of you are illegals? You’re all cockroaches! Go home!”

- *Curbing the Rights of Immigrants:* As cities and counties start to enforce immigration laws on the local level around the country, we are concerned that New Jersey municipalities have already begun to follow suit by considering ordinances that stem the rights of immigrants – particularly the undocumented. For example, Morristown Mayor Donald Cresitello, who governs a township with a significant South Asian population, has pushed for local police to make immigration checks during traffic stops and for minor crimes.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the August 2007 directive from the New Jersey Attorney General’s office, may have unintended negative consequences.<sup>8</sup> The directive raises concerns that any person of color – regardless of their immigration status – may be profiled and treated differently by local and state police. As a result of this directive and similar policies at the local level, many immigrants within the South Asian community, including those suffering from domestic violence or hate crimes, may

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<sup>7</sup> “Mayor must limit immigration checks,” *Newsday*, August 25, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> The directive requires local law enforcement to report to immigration officials when someone is suspected of being an undocumented immigrant and is arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol or any indictable offense. “Attorney General Law Enforcement Directive 2007-3”, State of New Jersey, Office of the Attorney General, Department of Law and Public Safety, August 22, 2007. Available at <http://www.nj.gov/oag/newsreleases07/ag-le-directive-2007-3.pdf>.

be hesitant to reach out to the police for needed assistance out of fear that they may be placed in deportation proceedings.

We urge the Governor's Blue Ribbon Advisory Panel to take the following steps as you begin to explore the experiences and situations of New Jersey immigrants:

- Convene ethnic-specific meetings/briefings with community-based leaders in the South Asian communities to learn more about the pressing concerns facing our communities
- Ensure that information about the South Asian community's experience is included in any official reports or materials disseminated by the Panel
- Propose policy changes that will increase access to services and benefits and eliminate bias/harassment faced in the school system
- Convene briefings and hearings to understand the impact of local law enforcement of immigration laws on immigrants in New Jersey and the needs of limited-English proficient immigrants accessing basic services, including English as a Second Language classes

Below is further information about our organizations. We look forward to working closely with the panel in the future.

#### About Manavi

*Manavi is a New Jersey-based women's rights organization that works to end all forms of violence against South Asian women living in the U.S. "South Asian" women are those who identify themselves as being from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, or Sri Lanka. Through a wide variety of programs, Manavi ensures that women of South Asian descent in the U.S can exercise their fundamental right to live a life of dignity that is safe and free from violence. Manavi provides services equitably to women from all South Asian countries and does not discriminate based on national, religious or sectarian grounds. Some of our services include individual counseling, legal clinics & referrals, support groups, court & medical accompaniments, and a transitional home.*

#### About SAMHAJ

*SAMHAJ (South Asian Mental Health Awareness in Jersey) seeks to improve the lives of South Asian Americans affected by mental illness through providing support for families, caregivers and individuals, by providing education on mental illness for the community, and advocating for the rights of those affected. SAMHAJ is a program from NAMI NEW JERSEY (National Alliance on Mental Illness of New Jersey).*

#### About SAALT

*SAALT is a national, non-profit organization dedicated to fostering civic and political engagement by South Asians in the United States using a social justice framework that combines policy analysis and advocacy, coalition building, community education and leadership development. SAALT's New Jersey Community Empowerment Project seeks to strengthen and coordinate local efforts to raise awareness of emerging needs and existing services for South Asians, and to engage in statewide policy discussions.*