

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 1412

As Reported by House Committee On:
State Government & Tribal Relations

Title: An act relating to establishing the Washington state commission on Middle Eastern and North African Americans.

Brief Description: Establishing the Washington state commission on Middle Eastern and North African Americans.

Sponsors: Representatives Farivar, Salahuddin, Simmons, Davis, Berry, Parshley, Peterson, Reed, Gregerson, Thai, Goodman, Doglio, Fey, Berg, Obras, Fosse, Pollet, Ryu, Street, Macri and Scott.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

State Government & Tribal Relations: 1/29/25, 2/4/25 [DPS].

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Establishes the Washington State Commission on Middle Eastern and North African Americans within the Office of the Governor.
- Recognizes the month of April as Middle Eastern and North African American heritage month.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON STATE GOVERNMENT & TRIBAL RELATIONS

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 4 members: Representatives Mena, Chair; Stearns, Vice Chair; Doglio and Farivar.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 2 members: Representatives Waters, Ranking Minority Member; Walsh, Assistant Ranking Minority Member.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Minority Report: Without recommendation. Signed by 1 member: Representative Chase.

Staff: Desiree Omli (786-7105).

Background:

State Commissions.

State law establishes a variety of commissions under the Office of the Governor, including:

- the State Commission on Hispanic Affairs, originally established in statute in 1971 as the Washington State Commission on Mexican-American Affairs;
- the State Commission on Asian Pacific American Affairs, originally established in 1974 as the Washington State Commission on Asian-American affairs;
- the Commission on African American Affairs, created in 1992;
- the Women's Commission established in 2018; and
- the LGBTQ Commission established in 2019.

Middle Eastern and North African Community.

According to the Census Bureau, in 2020 over 3.5 million people in America identified as being of Middle Eastern or North African (MENA) heritage. The Census Bureau's classification for the MENA population is geographically based and includes Arabic-speaking groups such as Egyptians and Jordanians, non-Arabic speaking groups such as Iranians and Israelis, and ethnic transnational groups from the MENA region such as the Assyrians and Kurds. In 2024 the United States Office of Management and Budget announced that it will revise race and ethnicity data collection practices across federal agencies, including the addition of a new MENA category to the 2030 Census—the first race and ethnicity category change since 1997. This category will include six subcategories: Lebanese, Iranian, Egyptian, Syrian, Iraqi, and Israeli, with an additional blank space to allow individuals to specify their own identity.

In 2024 the University of Washington conducted a study to explore the experiences that illustrate how factors such as legal status, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and geographic location contribute to outcomes in various aspects of life for MENA communities in Washington. The study defined MENA regions as regions united by shared cultural, historical, and geopolitical characteristics. Included among these regions were, as designated by the University of Washington, the following countries and territories: Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. The study found that 42,409 people in Washington self-reported as being of MENA heritage in the 2020 Census.

Summary of Substitute Bill:

The Washington State Commission on Middle Eastern and North African Americans

(Commission) is established in the Office of the Governor. The Commission will consist of 12 members appointed by the Governor. When making appointments, the Governor must aim to maintain a balanced distribution of MENA ethnic, geographic, gender, age, and occupational representation that is, where practicable, proportional to the makeup of the MENA communities in the state. The Governor must appoint an Executive Director of the Commission who has demonstrated expertise in MENA communities.

The primary duty of the Commission is to establish consistent data collection for the MENA community including education around the Census. Other duties include advising state agencies and the Legislature on policies and programs focusing on the special problems and needs of MENA Americans, and to assist educational institutions and public and private entities with celebrations and promoting awareness of major MENA cultural holidays. Each state agency is required to provide appropriate and reasonable assistance to the Commission as needed to carry out its statutory duties.

The month of April is designated as Middle Eastern and North African American heritage month.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill:

The legislative intent for the Commission to focus on improving data collection on the MENA community is modified to specify that the intent is to improve the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data. The definition of "Middle Eastern and North African Americans" is removed.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date of Substitute Bill: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) Establishing a MENA Commission would provide a valuable resource for the Legislature, the Governor's Office, and state agencies. It would provide a dedicated space for the MENA community to have a voice in the solutions to address their unique needs and challenges. An important function of the Commission will be to provide state entities with advice and support as agencies engage members of the MENA community in the process of carrying out their work. It is important to have a governmental entity that meaningfully engages, represents, and consults the MENA community in policy making decisions. Having a state commission will elevate the voices of the MENA community. Many members of the MENA community face prejudice and discrimination which has led to

socioeconomic challenges; barriers to getting culturally appropriate and linguistically competent services in areas like housing, employment, and health care; and a general lack of agency which is something all Americans deserve to have.

The Commission's focus around consistent data collection, particularly around the Census, is critical. Research has shown that when there is no MENA category available on a data survey, the vast majority will identify as white. However, when a MENA category is available, only 10 percent will identify as exclusively white. On the Census, the best option for reporting race for Middle Eastern and North Africans is often "white" but this does not reflect the lived experience of members of the MENA community. Currently, there is little to no demographic data on the MENA community; there is no way to measure their access to culturally relevant services or to know the graduation rate for MENA youth in the state. Without data on the MENA community, disparities are missed and go unaddressed. Having a commission is a step in the right direction to help the MENA community access fair and equitable treatment across sectors like education, health care, employment, and civil rights.

There were many people from the MENA community residing in Washington in the early days of statehood that contributed to society in impactful ways. By 1904, there were over one thousand Syrians, Lebanese, and Palestinians in Washington. People from the MENA community have made many contributions to the state including starting stores in Pike Place Market and opening the most popular confectionary in Seattle which for some time was the only place in Seattle to buy an ice cream cone. However, many people do not know about the history of the MENA community. Having a commission focused on the MENA community will increase education around members of that community and ensure that they do not get erased from history. Recognizing April as Middle Eastern and North African American Heritage Month would be a step forward in recognizing the contributions of the MENA community to the state and country.

Seeing the large number of people signed in opposed to this bill can only be explained as xenophobia and hate which is a painful reminder of what the MENA community is up against both federally and locally. There are many rich cultures represented in the MENA community, and having a commission would help to spread awareness and promote understanding of the different MENA communities and their culture.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying: Representative Darya Farivar, prime sponsor; Heidi Sadri; Yashar Shayan; Laila Saliba, Washington for Peace and Justice; Laila Saliba, Washington for Peace and Justice; Aya Samman; Zaid Haque, WA Dems Muslim Caucus; Leyla Salmassi; Angelique Rodriguez, CAIR-Washington; Roxana Norouzi, OneAmerica; Sameera Ibrahim ; Randa Tawil; Nilu Jenks; Lay Tavassoli; and Hanif Zarrabi-Kashani.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.