

March 25, 2024

Chair Bobby Joe Champion
95 University Avenue West
Minnesota Senate Building, 3221
St. Paul, MN 55115

Dear Chair Champion and Members of the Senate Jobs Committee:

My name is Ishwari Rajak. I am a woman and an Asian immigrant. I am writing this letter in support of SF 4914, 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
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