

 **Iowa Department of Human Services**

**Terry E. Branstad Kim Reynolds Charles M. Palmer Governor Lt. Governor Director**

June 5, 2014

Dear Selection Committee:

I write today to nominate Henny Ohr for the Meredith Emerging Woman of Influence Award. Henny has been tireless in her work on behalf of traumatized people whose journey to freedom led them to Iowa. In a speech he gave to immigrant entrepreneurs, Governor Branstad mentioned that if it weren’t for immigrants and refugees, Iowa would be losing population. Indeed, not only are our newest Iowans increasing our diversity, they are also keeping us growing, taking jobs many natives reject, and blending the wisdom, traditions, family values and community traditions of their cultures with ours. We are all richer for it.

On the national refugee scene, “Mutual Assistance Associations” (MAA’s) have proven extremely effective at helping refugees acclimate, assimilate and thrive. From the very first days Governor Robert Ray established Iowa’s refugee program, refugee community leaders have been engaged to help their communities. It has been some time since Iowa has seen this level of organization among refugee groups, so I was tremendously encouraged to see Ethnic Minorities of Burma Advocacy and Resource Center (EMBARC) take its first steps toward becoming an effective organization. One of the key early challenges MAA’s face is organization and logistics. Organizing volunteers, assessing needs, securing donations and grant funding, providing a place where refugees who are struggling can go and speak to a member of their culture who knows about those challenges—all of these things take time, effort and professional expertise. While Henny is very humble about her efforts to put EMBARC on a solid footing, it is clear to me that without her tireless efforts, professionalism and dedication, EMBARC may have never formed, let alone become the funded, effective organization it is today.

As you will see from her resume and the abbreviated list of accomplishments I was able to compile, Henny has been a tireless advocate for those who need a little help, or a “hand up” in order to make their highest and best contribution to our community. These are not people who are waiting for a hand out. These are people who have fled persecution in war-torn areas, survived the deprivations of refugee camps, sometimes for decades, then borrowed enough money to fly with their families to a new land where they don’t know the language, culture or societal norms, with little but the clothes on their backs and a dream of a better life for their families. As anyone can imagine, people who have grown up in a remote camp in Southeast Asia might be a little overwhelmed upon landing in our modern society. A caring “navigator” from their culture can make all the difference in keeping hope alive, assuring children are integrated into our education system, and promoting each refugee’s ability to work hard, learn English and seek job training to advance. Henny’s efforts have been critical in allowing EMBARC to become that “hand up” for thousands of refugees from Burma who now call Iowa home. In my estimation, Henny Ohr is the very embodiment of an “Emerging Woman of Influence.” I hope you’ll agree.

 Sincerely,

 Loren Bawn

 Operations Manager