



# Board of Commissioners of Cook County

118 North Clark Street  
Chicago, IL

## Legislation Text

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File #: 20-2866, Version: 1

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### PROPOSED RESOLUTION

#### HONORING THE LIFE AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF MOHAMMAD RIAD HUSSAIN ISMAT

**WHEREAS**, Riad Ismat, former Syrian Minister of Culture, succumbed to Covid-19 on May13, 2020. Riad was a playwright, cultural critic, Shakespearean scholar, director and ultimately minister of culture. He was a figure not unlike the late Vaclav Havel, playwright and former president of the Czech Republic. His death set off an outpouring of grief among Syrian exiles and diplomats, as well as academics and students at a variety of educational institutions including Northwestern University, Columbia College, and North Central College in Naperville; and

**WHEREAS**, born in Damascus, Syria, Riad earned his degree in English literature at Damascus University. He then earned a postgraduate diploma in theater directing at Dardiff University, U.K. and subsequently received a certificate in television production and direction from the BBC. From 2013-2014, he served as a visiting professor at Northwestern University's Buffet Center for International and Comparative Studies. From 2014-2015, he was a scholar-in-residence at the North Central College in Naperville, where he taught playwright, acting and directing as well as lectured on Syrian and Arabic literature and drama; and

**WHEREAS**, Riad came to Evanston as part of *Scholars at Risk*, an international group dedicated to human rights and academic freedoms, known for finding homes for people speaking out against oppression. As Syria became embroiled in conflict Riad found himself trying to stake out a humanist position distinct from both warring sides. Although he supported the people's movement, he stood firm against terrorism. He took positions against Bashar al-Assad's authoritarian actions and against the so-called military/security solution, which used force instead of engaging in a political dialogue in response to the demands of demonstrators for tangible and quick reform; and

**WHEREAS**, Riad was prolific - he penned 35 books and directed more than a dozen major theatrical productions, all while (once) running Syria's state radio and television, serving as Syrian ambassador to Pakistan and Qatar, and then serving as its Minister of Culture, a powerful position close to a president with whom he parted ways; and

**WHEREAS**, Riad refused to call himself a politician, preferring to be known as a dramatist who wrote about politics. He believed that culture exists to unify a nation, not to divide it. During his tenure as minister, he emphasized the role culture should play in promoting values of tolerance, diversity, pluralism, democracy, and freedom of expression. He observed that many of the artists and writers he met in the opposition believe in secularism, reform and democracy, not in terrorism and dismantling the state; and

**WHEREAS**, cognizant of Syria's illustrious past, Riad saw a crucial role for the arts in the future of a free Syria. His own writings incorporated a thriving cultural scene in Damascus populated by daring artists with their ear to the concerns on the street. "Riad understood the power of connecting people through art and culture," wrote Jamil Khoury, the founding artistic director of Silk Road Rising in Chicago and a fellow Syrian emigre; and

**WHEREAS**, Sami, Riad's son, said that his father had come to love living in Evanston, giving talks on "Shakespeare and the Middle East" at the Evanston Public Library, or comparing acting to diplomacy for small groups in Naperville, all while leading the life of a quiet but persistent scholar. Shortly before he died, Riad received word that his son, Karim, had been received into the doctoral program in neurobiology at Boston University. Meanwhile, Sami, graduated with a master's degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, following in his father's footsteps; and

**WHEREAS**, in addition to his sons, Riad is survived by his wife, Azzah.

**NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED**, that the Board of Commissioners of Cook County, on behalf of the 5.2 million residents of Cook County honors the life and contributions of the **MOHAMMAD RIAD HUSSAIN ISMAT**, and herewith expresses its sincere gratitude for the invaluable contributions he has made to the Citizens of Cook County, Illinois; and

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that a suitable copy of this Resolution be spread upon the official proceedings of this Honorable Body and that an official copy of the same be tendered to the family of the **MOHAMMAD RIAD HUSSAIN ISMAT**.