



**THE COUNCIL
OF ISLAMIC ORGANIZATIONS
OF GREATER CHICAGO**

**Testimony to Illinois Senate Redistricting Committee
Ahlam Jbara, Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago
April 28, 2011**

Good Morning Chairman Raoul and distinguished committee members. Thank you for holding this hearing and giving us the opportunity to speak today. My name is Ahlam Jbara and I am the Interim Executive Director of the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago as well as an active member of the Arab and Muslim Community. I am also a member and on the social service committee of the Mosque Foundation in Bridgeview, on the board of Project Mobilize a C4 civic engagement organization; the Arab American Action Network, a social service organization on the south side of Chicago. I have worked and volunteered in our diverse ethnic communities for over 13 years providing social services, teaching English and Citizenship classes, providing leadership development training for the Arab youth, organizing non-partisan civic engagement efforts and worked around issues like racial profiling and language access for limited English speakers.

I am here today on behalf of the CIOGC and our ethnically diverse members; the CIOGC is a membership institution of over 53 mosques; full time accredited schools; social service, civil rights and advocacy organizations state wide. The Muslim American community is estimated at 400,000 and growing in Illinois. Muslim Americans are very diverse from native born to minorities from the Arab-American, African-American, African Immigrants, Latino American and Asian-American populations.

I have provided testimony on behalf of our ethnic communities on the north side city and far north suburbs and south side. Today, I'm here with our partners on the Southwest Side of Chicago. There is a large Arab population which is served and organized by Mosque Foundation, Project Mobilize, Arab American Family Services, and Arab American Action Network.

There is a large Arab Community in the Southwest Suburbs in Bridgeview, Oak Lawn, Burbank, Chicago Ridge, Justice, Hickory Hills, Palos Hills, Worth, Palos Park and Orland Park areas. It is crucial and imperative that our voice and vote not be diluted.

In the above mentioned areas there are schools (Universal and Aqsa) and institutions (Mosque Foundation, Arab American Family Services, Arab American Action Network, Project Mobilize, Zakat Foundation, Muslim American Society and others) that organize our communities that fall under the umbrella of the CIOGC. We have seen and heard the issues that our community members face such as the need for linguistically and culturally appropriate social services, especially for limited English Speakers; the need for cross cultural communications and understanding; the need for increased English and Citizenship services, effectively serving students in schools with high Asian, Arab and African populations, and the need to be heard by our elected officials.

Unfortunately we don't have census numbers that can verify the numbers of Arab Americans in Illinois, but you will hear from Arab American Family Services and Project Mobilize Statistics of Arab American families they serve and organize. The Mosque Foundation alone serves about 50,000 Muslim Americans a year.

Division of our community through redistricting will erase our voices, and make it even more challenging to organize and unite on common issues. This will in turn affect our ability to conduct

voter registration campaigns, mobilize registered voters, and educate our community members about the electoral process. Our social and religious institutions built within already established communities and serve to help disseminate critical information relating to social services like English/citizenship classes, job training programs, social events, political events, youth events, etc. Our communities face a host of common issues such as the need for culturally and linguistically appropriate social services, especially for people with limited English proficiency and people new to this country.

If the district lines divide these integral community institutions, it will be an additional challenge for our community to overcome. District lines will have a direct effect on how responsive elected officials will be to our needs. For example, we have been working to establish relationships with State Senators and Representatives on the Southwest side (city and suburbs). They understand our issues such as civil rights, zoning, social services, English and citizenship classes, language access, protecting the undocumented and having a voice in the process. Such responsiveness from legislators can only improve if we are united into fewer districts.

The Arab American community has taken initiative over the past few years to organize our community members, develop our youth in civic engagement, increase the number of registered voters, conducting voter education, get out the vote campaigns, census outreach and increasing our involvement with the electoral process.

I hope our testimony today and our years of activism and organizing is taken into account by this committee in the redistricting process. We are unique as an ethnically diverse but still distinct and cohesive community of interest; the CIOGC is focused on the people and our community. We want to be treated fairly during the redistricting process, it is important that the redistricting process is transparent. District lines have a real impact on whether we as minorities can participate in government and make a positive difference in our communities. We want to be grouped together so that we can elect candidates of our choice who can be responsive to our needs. We also worked with Asian American Institute to create maps for the north side and northern suburbs with specific boundaries, and AAI has presented those maps to the committee. We will submit maps for the Southwest Suburbs once we have finalized them.

We are willing and able to meet with all legislators to answer any questions relating to the Arab Community.

Thank you.

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