

Public Testimony to the Illinois Senate Redistricting Committee

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Good evening. My name is Valerie Leonard, and I am a resident of North Lawndale and Co-Founder of the Lawndale Alliance.

First of all, we would like to say thank you for agreeing to host a public hearing on Chicago's West Side on May 2nd, 2011. We look forward to providing further testimony, and hope to have a preliminary proposal for you taking into account feedback from local residents—if not at the West Side hearing, then shortly thereafter.

We have provided testimony at your first hearing in Chicago on March 28th; a second hearing in Springfield on April 6th; and the House's hearing in Cicero on April 16th. North Lawndale residents including Mickey Johnson and Sondra Spellman attended your hearing in Cicero April 19th. We have attached for your convenience copies of our written testimony from Saturday's hearing, as well as notes from the proceedings. The focus of our testimony today is on our observations of the process to date, and recommendations going forward.

The Need for Transparency and Accuracy Goes Both Ways

We have read a number of articles and heard public testimony from various groups calling for transparency on your part, in terms of making sure the process is open to as many citizens as possible, and requests for your proposed map to be made public before it is approved by the Legislature. We agree. However, we community advocates must hold ourselves to the same standard. We have heard, on more than one occasion, groups testifying in support of greater representation in the Legislature for their particular ethnic group. When they were asked what a "good" number would be in order to be fair, the typical response was that the groups were still working on determining the number. Once these numbers are determined, it would be helpful for all stakeholders to hear the targets, in as much as the borders of one district could impact other districts in the State. One way to do this is to continue to post everyone's testimony on the website.

A witness from a community-based organization representing one community of interest provided a proposed map that was alleged to be flawed by a subsequent witness. The proposal allegedly over-stated the numbers of one ethnic group and diluted the voting strength of another ethnic group within the district, and would leave the state open for a Voting Rights challenge. We respectfully request that any proposal for new or existing districts be subject to due diligence so that your decisions are based on accurate information.

Need to Balance the Needs of Citizens and Undocumented Immigrants

The law currently allows for apportionment based on the numbers of persons in a district regardless of citizenship. It is important that people who are still seeking citizenship have a “go-to” person in the Legislature who understands their needs and can help guide them through the process of becoming citizens and seeking supportive services. However, we respectfully request that boundaries are drawn in such a manner as to create balance, and not inadvertently dilute the voting strength of citizens in favor of those who are still going through the process. We trust that the final map will be subject to retrogression tests to ensure fairness for all stakeholders.

Need to Be Judicious in the Use of Coalition Districts

The Illinois Voting Rights Act of 2011 currently provides for the creation of coalition districts, crossover districts, and influence districts. We have not been around the State to hear testimony from every hearing. We are aware of existing districts that could qualify as crossover districts, and proposals that could qualify as influence districts. We have yet to hear of any proposals from any groups proposing to form a coalition to elect a candidate of choice. Our observation has been that minority groups have tended to advance the interests of their own communities of interest, and have only spoken of the coalition districts in hypothetical terms. We respectfully request that no coalition districts be created without an express proposal for two or more minority groups to work together in the future to elect a candidate of their choice. Creating such districts at the unilateral request of one group would give undo advantage to the group that’s making the proposal.