

Public Testimony to the Illinois Senate Redistricting Committee

Presented by Valerie F. Leonard, Founder, Nonprofit Utopia, LLC
March 25, 2021

Good afternoon. My name is Valerie Leonard. I am the Founder of Nonprofit Utopia, the ideal community for emerging nonprofit leaders who want to build their own leadership skills while building the capacity of their organizations to make a positive impact on their clients and communities. Our membership includes nonprofit leaders from around Chicago, including the West, South and North sides; other states and abroad. Our mission is to develop the next generation of ethical nonprofit leaders, with a vision to train 50,000 people by 2033. This is achieved through consulting, coaching, an online community, livestreamed videos and podcasting.

Nonprofit Utopia, IVI-IPO and the Chicago Lawyer's Committee on Civil Rights have partnered to provide a series of workshops for community based organizations on a number of topics, including the state and federal voting rights acts and proposed changes; the redistricting process; developing public testimony, etc. We are also hosting the Census Bureau to facilitate a workshop on navigating Census.gov; creating data sets and understanding reapportionment.

I am a CoFounder of the Lawndale Alliance, a neighborhood association of local residents who come together on an ad hoc basis to address issues of concern to the community through grassroots community organizing, advocacy and community outreach. We were part of a statewide, multi-cultural coalition of grassroots organizations, facilitated by UCCRO, who came together to develop proposals to optimize opportunities for minorities around the State of Illinois to select candidates of their choice. Our map proposal provided more majority-minority districts than any other proposal in the state of Illinois.

While we didn't get everything we wanted, we came very close, and we thank the Illinois Senate Redistricting Committee, led by then-Senator Kwame Raoul, for fully considering concerns voiced by the Lawndale Alliance in 2011 this included things like adding a Westside hearing to the meeting document, on a weekend, when it didn't seem possible at the time of our request. We appreciate the fact that the North Lawndale community's boundaries were all contained within the boundaries of the 9th Legislative District and 5th Senatorial District. As a result, for the past 10 years, we have been able to go to a single state representative and a single state senator to advocate for community resources and policy changes that would enhance the quality of life for our residents.

We respectfully request, that, as you develop the new map that you take into consideration the following:

North Lawndale is a Community of Interest

The North Lawndale community is located approximately 3 miles west of the Chicago Downtown. As of 2018, the racial composition was 87% African American, 5.27% Hispanic, 8.83% White, .17% Asian, and .61% of some other race. The community continues to struggle with issues of high rates of poverty and unemployment, blighted commercial districts, high crime, poor performing schools, high mortgage foreclosure rates, lack of access to decent and affordable housing, and limited access to health care.

While we have a number of challenges, we also have a number of assets, including Douglas Park designed by the legendary landscape architect Jens Jensen and the Historic K-Town District, one of the largest concentrations of historic Greystone houses in the City of Chicago. The community is held together by its history and culture, which includes block clubs, community gardening, basketball games and gospel festivals. North Lawndale nurtured the talents of such people as Dina Washington, Ramsey Lewis, Otis Clay, Koko Taylor, Cicero Blake, Mark Aguire, Darryl Stingley, Mickey Johnson and Michael Scott, to name a few. The community has completed a combined comprehensive plan and Quality of Life Plan, with technical assistance from CMAP and LISC. The plan is in its implementation stages, and is attracting billions of dollars in investment. Indeed, I am very proud to have played an integral role in the development of the infrastructure for the planning process, including writing the proposals to CMAP and LISC.

North Lawndale covers approximately 40% of the land mass in Representative District 9, and 20% of Senate District 5. Approximately 80% of North Lawndale's land mass is in the 24th Ward, and the 24th Ward accounts for nearly half of Representative District 9's weighted vote, and about a fourth of the weighted vote for Senate District 5. North Lawndale is in the 7th Congressional District. The voters of Representative District 9 tend to vote Democratic.

The Lawndale Alliance is a neighborhood association of local residents who come together on an ad hoc basis to address issues of concern to the community through grassroots community organizing, advocacy and community outreach. We hold annual TIF town hall meetings series on a number of topics, including status reports on the financial and programmatic performance of every TIF that impacts North Lawndale; the performance of North Lawndale schools; the pros and cons of hosting Olympic venue in North Lawndale; and a status report on the impact of the mortgage foreclosure crisis and the level of Neighborhood Stabilization Program funding the community received to put abandoned foreclosed properties back on the property tax rolls as affordable housing units.

Treatment of Prisoners in Census Count

Under current law, incarcerated persons are not counted in the Census numbers of the community from which they originate, but in the populations of the towns in which they are incarcerated. As a result, the Census numbers in Chicago for African Americans is significantly undercounted, while the numbers in some Downstate communities is inflated by over 95%. On top of that, representatives from the districts in which the prisoners are incarcerated have a history of voting against legislation that will enhance education, job training and rehabilitation of prisoners. In effect, prisoners have no representation, and this is a clear violation of the “one man, one vote”, guaranteed by our Constitution.

On the other hand, legislators from the prisoners’ originating communities tend to be the ones advocating for improved education and rehabilitation services for prisoners who are not counted in their districts’ population. To add insult to injury, Downstate towns are receiving entitlement funds for Community Development Block Grants and Social Service Development Block Grants that benefit their communities, but not the prisoners. When the prisoners return home their originating communities are the ones who must help them transition by providing housing, job training and other social services. Unfortunately, the originating communities don’t get their full share of funding because the prisoners were counted in the Downstate town’s Census statistics. I respectfully request that the Legislature support Representative LaShawn K. Ford’s proposed legislation to ensure that prisoners are included in the Census counts from their originating communities.

Illinois Will Probably Lose A Congressional Seat

Because the State of Illinois’ population grew at a slower rate than most states in the country, we will be losing a Congressional seat. Chicago’s three Congressional Districts headed by African Americans have each lost population and must expand boundaries. During the last redistricting process, there were proposals to eliminate one of the districts. We respectfully request that any new boundaries be drawn to protect the voting rights of African Americans by ensuring that we continue to be represented by each of the African American members of the Illinois Delegation. It should be noted that African Americans, as a percentage of Chicago’s population was reduced by less than 1 percent during the last Census. It should also be reiterated that our numbers are significantly undercounted due to the numbers of African Americans incarcerated in Downstate prisons.

The North Lawndale Community Should Be Kept Intact

Currently, the entire North Lawndale Community, as defined by Chicago Community Area 29, is located in the 9th Legislative District and the 7th Congressional District. We respectfully request that the House of Representatives Special Committee on Redistricting keep the community intact to ensure that the special needs of our community are addressed by a single legislator. We have heard testimony from social service providers from other communities indicating the level of confusion caused by delivering services to a client base with multiple legislators and other local government officials.

In closing, we thank you for your time and consideration, and hosting this public forum. If you have any questions, I may be reached at 773-521-3137 or valeriefleonard@nonprofitutopia.com