



CHANGE Illinois Testimony: Transparent and Accountable Redistricting

April 8, 2021

Illinois Senate Committee on Redistricting--Chicago Northwest

To: Chair Villivalam and committee members

From: Syamala Krishnamsetty (she,her,hers), Advocacy Director at CHANGE Illinois

Thank you Chair Villivalam and committee members for the opportunity to provide testimony. My name is Syamala Krishnamsetty and I am the advocacy director at CHANGE Illinois and the CHANGE Illinois Action Fund. Both are nonpartisan nonprofits that educate, engage and advocate for ethics and efficiency in governments and elections. CHANGE Illinois is a coalition and alongside our diverse partners in more than 30 organizations, we long have advocated for an independent, transparent redistricting process.

There's now been three weeks of hearings that have covered almost half of the counties in Illinois. Participation by the general public at these hearings has not been nearly enough to ensure that maps will accurately reflect the many diverse communities all over Illinois. There were a number of community and good government organizations whose representatives testified and all of us, independently, said the Senate and House committee meetings need more transparency.

Many questions remain unanswered. And new issues are arising; in the last week, two committee hearings were held without an option for the public to participate virtually. The public was denied the opportunity to view the proceeding without a live stream provided. Denying remote participation at the last minute forces people to make a choice between risking their health and providing a voice for their community. We should not force any one to make that decision when the Legislature made the necessary changes to allow remote participation earlier this year.

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Witnesses continue to raise concerns about the lack of transparency and detail about the subject matter, about how people should know who should show up to which committee hearings based on vague geographic areas, and about how testimony will be reflected in map proposals. There has been no indication of what the process looks like after April 17th when the last committee hearing is scheduled to take place.

We appreciate the Senate's effort to post upcoming hearings with slightly more notice. And we've certainly noted and appreciated the efforts made by members of this committee, like Senator Cristina Pacione-Zayas, to communicate information about state redistricting and this hearing to constituents.

But we continue to have concerns about 1.) lack of transparency and detail about the remaps, 2.) which hearings to attend based on vague geographic areas, and 3.) how testimony will be reflected in map proposals.



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A fair map doesn't result from simply holding hearings. There must be more robust outreach to communities across Illinois to give people ample time to plan to attend.

In the past few years, the state spent millions of dollars to ensure widespread participation in the 2020 Census. Currently, the state isn't doing a fraction of that to ensure people are aware of opportunities to participate in redistricting hearings that will influence how they are represented for the next decade. Posting notice on government websites is not enough to achieve the broad public participation that is needed.

Good government groups and community organizations are doing their part to notify residents, but it is challenging when we cannot answer basic questions. The people of Illinois need this committee to respond to their input and explain how it will be used in map proposals. **They need to see map proposals weeks before votes are taken, and they need to have the opportunity to weigh-in at additional public hearings after maps are made public.**

We have been presented with two options by lawmakers: Either give up our democracy to a random draw, giving Republicans a shot to have unilateral control over map-making, or allow for maps to be pushed through by the Democratic majority using ACS data that never was intended to be used for drawing legislative maps. But these are not our only options.

As the representatives from the National Conference of State Legislatures testified on March 17, the Illinois General Assembly could appeal to courts to grant a delay in constitutional deadlines to wait for census data. Elected officials could pass a law to push back our Primary Election Day and the petition filing period to ensure map drawers have enough time to draw maps before election filing deadlines. This is being done in other states, such as California and Oregon.

We need more accountability in this redistricting process. We need to ensure that the maps produced prioritize Federal and state voting rights acts and protect communities of interest. The people of Illinois need and want lawmakers to make it clear, in state law, that districts will be created without prioritizing incumbents or candidates from one party, whether that is for their benefit or harm. A compliance report is needed, explaining how maps meet these shared values, along with the value of prioritizing communities of color and those for whom English is not their primary language. Non English speakers continue to face impediments to participating in this process because accommodations have not been made for them.

It is imperative that more information be provided about how these hearings will be conducted and how these maps will be drawn. We ask this committee and the Senate to meet the challenges ahead so Illinoisans get a map that puts power in their hands.

Illinois' districts belong to the people. They expect an independent and transparent process that values and responds to their input. They expect maps to be created that aren't based on politics, but on the needs of their communities. We urge you to meet their clear expectations.

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