



**TESTIMONY BY CHICAGO LAWYERS' COMMITTEE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS
BEFORE THE ILLINOIS SENATE REDISTRICTING COMMITTEE
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Submitted By:

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Thank you to Chairman Acquino and Vice Chair Sims for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Ami Gandhi and I am a Senior Counsel at Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights, a non-profit, non-partisan organization that has been working for the past 50 years to advance racial equity and economic opportunity for all. We provide legal representation through partnerships with our 40 member law firms. We collaborate with grassroots organizations to implement community-based solutions that advance civil rights.

I lead our organization's efforts to protect voting rights in Illinois and Indiana. We work to reduce barriers to voting and civic participation, especially in communities of color and low-income communities. We aim to ensure that all eligible voters are able to cast ballots, that their votes are not diluted, and that the system does not undermine their fundamental right to vote and right to choose their elected officials.

Chicago Lawyers' Committee has a history of representing Black community organizations in redistricting litigation under the federal Voting Rights Act and the Constitution. We regularly partner with national Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law on civil rights cases. Even aside from litigation, we are proud to work with Black voters and other voters of color in working collaboratively together with our government leaders to try to strengthen voters' rights and our ability to elect the candidates of our choice. Through our non-partisan Election Protection program, we answer voters' questions over the phone and in person, especially focused on outreach to Black voters and voters of color who are facing unfair barriers to voting. We have the privilege of working with community members on the South and West sides of Chicago and the south and west suburbs, as well as community members in prison and jail environments.

It is an honor to do this work. I can report to you that community members are eager to give input during this redistricting cycle and will be watching to see if that input is meaningfully considered by lawmakers. There must be robust opportunities for input *after* lawmakers share proposed maps with the public but *before* the maps are finalized. Ultimately community members will have the most relevant insights about specific whether proposed lines dilute their voting rights. We appreciate and respect legislators' weighty responsibility for redistricting, but legislators' input simply is not a substitute for community members' input.



Before I joined the staff of Chicago Lawyers' Committee, during the 2011 redistricting cycle, I had the opportunity to advocate alongside a diversity of communities of color on a unity map effort. Our coalition included organizations that engaged Black, Latino, Asian American, and Arab American communities. We did not achieve all that we aimed to do, but there were some important signs of progress. We stood in solidarity and worked hard to avoid being pitted against each other.

As a voting rights and civil rights attorney, I am concerned about the need for greater community engagement this time around. The select few of us who were able to sign up in time to speak today and wait for hours to speak is not representative of everyone who cares about having their voices heard and having their votes counted fairly. There are already multiple ongoing tables and convenings about this very topic of redistricting, including the Illinois Redistricting Collaborative and Just Democracy Illinois. These non-partisan coalitions include an array of participants – people who support the current redistricting system and timing, people who support specific alternative reforms, and people who hope for other creative solutions to the persistent racial inequity in Illinois. Their voices should be heard.

There are ways to meaningfully engage community members in redistricting that beyond online hearings that people do not entirely trust. Chicago Lawyers' Committee is interested in knowing what specific mechanisms will be in place for community review and input after proposed maps and data are released. Though creativity is required to find ways to engage community members during the pandemic, it is possible to do and it is essential to do.

We urge this committee to take the time to join existing community conversations about redistricting and not merely expect people to enroll to speak at these formal committee and subcommittee hearings requiring advance signup on short notice. Such a process is daunting even for our most civically engaged community members.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony.