

Public Testimony to the Illinois House Redistricting Committee

Presented by Valerie F. Leonard, Founder, Nonprofit Utopia, LLC
April 3, 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. We are also working with Illinois African Americans for Equitable Redistricting, a coalition, in formation. So far, over 30 Black leaders throughout the City of Chicago, and the South and West Suburbs to heighten awareness of redistricting issues to Black communities in an effort to increase participation in the process from those neighborhoods.

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:

In Keeping With the Practice of Viewing Policy and Legislation Through An Equity Lens, The House Redistricting Committee Should Be More Intentional About Outreach to Black Communities on Chicago's West Side

We are very happy that the Illinois House is applying an equity lens to all the work you do. It should be noted that there are no Illinois Redistricting Committee Hearings scheduled to be held in the North Lawndale, East Garfield, West Garfield or Austin Communities. There is no intention on having the meetings in these communities, to the best of my knowledge. It should be noted that Austin is the largest community in the City of Chicago, and it is majority Black.

We realize you can't have meetings everywhere, but, when these communities are losing Black population, it's not stupid, or too much to ask to have a meeting in one of these communities during a time people are not at work, or on a religious holiday, like Good Friday. There is no doubt in my mind that our elected representatives will watch the process to ensure that the State will draw as many majority-minority districts as possible. It would be best if the lines could be drawn with more intentional outreach and input from the Black Community.

We applaud the fact that a special effort was made to host meetings in the West Side Puerto Rican Community and West Suburban/ Westside Mexican Community. It is critical that their voices are heard in the redistricting process. By the same token, it is equitable and just that a special effort to accommodate West Side Black communities that have lost population. We respectfully request that you schedule a hearing with a focus on boundaries in these neighborhoods.

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 a little more than 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.

It should be noted that as of September 30, 2020, which includes the October 15th deadline for Census taking, there were 30,894 prisoners in the Illinois Department of Corrections prisons. Of that number, 13,565 were from Cook county, or 44%. Nine thousand, eight hundred seventy-two (9,872), or 73% were Black.

In 2017, the State of Illinois received \$55,855,815,000 in Census-driven funding. If we divide the number by Illinois' population of 12.65 million people, we come up with a rough estimate of \$4,415 per person per year, or \$59,895,979 per annum in 2017 dollars. Multiply this by the 10 year Census cycle, we are talking about losing up to \$598,959,790.00 in resources that could have been coming to Cook County over the next 10 years. Instead, these resources are going to prison towns and communities. About \$43.7 million per year could be going to Black communities in Cook County, assuming that all the prisoners are from predominantly Black communities. This translates into \$437 million over the next ten years, if the funding formula stays the same. The Black Communities across Cook County could use this money to shore up under-resourced schools, build affordable housing and improve access to health care.

We are very thankful that legislation was recently passed to end prison gerrymandering 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. However, we were dismayed to learn that, for some reason, a last minute change to the bill moving the effective date from immediately to 2025 was made before the bill became law. This means that, effectively, the change won't take effect for the redistricting process until 2030. We can't wait. We need the resources and appropriate representation for returning prisoners now.

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. I have attached the following:

1. Power Point presentation summarizing my remarks
2. A Portrait of Prisoner Re-entry In Illinois
3. North Lawndale Community Data Snapshot
4. Mass Incarceration Draws Its Own Maps and Creates a Country in Its Image
<https://newrepublic.com/article/161817/mass-incarceration-prison-gerrymandering-districts>