

Addendum to 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.

Follow Up to Today's Cicero/Berwyn Hearing

I find it disheartening that I took the time to develop testimony and complete a witness slip for today's Cicero/Berwyn Redistricting Committee meeting and was not sent a Zoom link to testify. There are people who had an opportunity to testify who didn't fill out a witness slip. I don't have a problem with them getting an opportunity. They should have an opportunity to speak on such critical issues impacting their community. I just wish I had an opportunity.

Even though North Lawndale, West Garfield and Austin are adjacent to Cicero, there were no panelists from these communities. There have not been any West Side redistricting hearings targeting people from these communities, which happen to be majority Black. Given that we could be significantly impacted, we should have our voices heard directly in this process.

I totally appreciate the fact that the people testifying have indicated that they are making recommendations that take into account all minority communities. Like the LatinX community, the Black communities from Chicago's West Side has issues that are specific to our geography and culture. I have, myself, worked with a multi-cultural coalition that developed a mapping proposal to the state that optimized opportunities of all minority groups in the State of Illinois. However, I would have liked to have had an opportunity to testify on behalf of North Lawndale, District 9, District 10 and Senate District 5.

We need a hearing that will target the African American community on the West Side. I respectfully request that the House Redistricting Committee host a meeting in one of the targeted communities outlined above. I would be very happy to help with outreach.

Respectfully Submitted,

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