Written Testimony of The Reverend Doctor Leon Finney
On Behalf of African Americans for Legislative Redistricting
Senate Redistricting Committee - May 29, 2011

My name is The Reverend Doctor Leon Finney. I am President and CEO of the Woodlawn Community Development Corporation, and I submit this testimony as a member of African Americans for Legislative Redistricting (AALR). AALR is a coalition of African-American civic organizations created to ensure the fair representation of African-American interests in the 2011 remap. The coalition includes, among other organizations, the Cook County Bar Association, the Chicago Urban League, Operation Rainbow Push, and the Woodlawn Community Development Corporation. The purpose of our testimony is to voice our support for the congressional redistricting plan contained in House Amendment #1 to Senate Bill 1178, specifically the retention of Congressional Districts 1, 2 and 7 as African-American majority districts.

 The African-American Congressional Districts in the Chicago area are among the oldest in the nation and enjoy a venerable pedigree. The First Congressional District, for instance, elected the first Black Congressman of the twentieth century and the first Black Congressman outside of the South, Oscar DePreist. The Seventh Congressional District elected the first Black woman to serve from the Midwest, Cardiss Collins, who would later become Chairperson of the Congressional Black Caucus and would retire as the longest-serving Black female in the history of the House of Representatives.

Despite population dispersal from the City of Chicago to the southern and western suburbs, the Black population in the Chicago area continues to be large enough to support three Congressional Districts with Black voting-age majorities. The congressional redistricting contained in House Amendment #1 recognizes this fact and retains three African-American majority congressional districts. It does so by using the core and basic contours of the districts that were drawn ten years ago and that have performed successfully as Black opportunity districts for several decades in the cases of Congressional Districts 1 and 7, and for at least several years in the case of Congressional District 2.

Maintaining the communities of interests that have historically resided in these three districts has important benefits for voters in these districts as well as for the City of Chicago and the State of Illinois. For instance, Congressional District 7's continuity of representation in Congress has led to a seat on the powerful House of Representative Ways and Means Committee. Similarly, in the 111th Congress, the Representative from the First Congressional District chaired the House Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade and Consumer Protection, while the Representative from the Second Congressional District served as a senior member of the House Appropriations Committee. In sum, the representative-constituent relationship facilitated by maintaining these districts yields tangible dividends for their communities of interests. It is both practical and sensible to keep these communities of interests intact.