

Illinois Senate Redistricting Committee Hearing April 6th, 2011.

Dear Chairman Senator Raoul and members of the Senate Redistricting Committee,

First of all thank you for allowing me to speak here today. What has brought me here is continuous and consistent restlessness, insecurity and a sense of loss which haunts most of my community members in their newly adopted country, simply because they don't have any voice in any public office at the local, state and federal level. This is predominantly because of the present district lines which cut them into smaller groups, not because of any lack of political and social activism.

Let me give you a brief history of my involvement and quote an example to emphasize what I am trying to prove.

I have been involved with the South Asian Community in the Chicago area since 1990. I have lived in the north side of Chicago since that time. I ran a community broadcasting network since 1994, started first ever local Pakistani Urdu TV program in 1994, and first ever Urdu/Hindi talk show in North America in 1997. I write in more than two ethnic news papers and correspond for 4 television networks. I have been a board member of human services organizations like Hamdard and Metropolitan Asian Family Services. I am part of Community Builders, a very active group of South Asians mainly from India and Pakistan, which organizes seminars and workshops to educate the community at large on political, social, civic and mental health issues. My relationship with my community is more than casual. I am a social and political activist, a journalist and a resident of Rogers Park in the West Ridge area. I have seen Devon Avenue as a thriving business district and I am seeing its decline now.

In 1999 during a meeting of business and community leaders on TIF funding, when I confronted the Alderman of 50th Ward Mr. Bernard Stone against his one sided attempt to impose zoning on the side streets of Devon Avenue during day time hours and pointed out that it will kill the businesses. He responded that the business owners are not his constituents and he doesn't care about them. He only cares for his voters. Mind you all those businesses were bringing revenue and providing jobs to the local residents, mostly South Asians. Since then the parking situation and its accompanied hazards have killed this business district. The profound effects of parking problems in this area have been analyzed and documented in the 2007 West Ridge Community Survey (on file with the Asian American Institute). Similar lack of responsiveness from not just city but also state officials makes it quite difficult for community members to have their problems resolved effectively.

The South Asian community is increasing in number in the Rogers Park, West Ridge, and Albany Park neighborhoods at a phenomenal rate. This area is referred to as the "North Chicago" cluster in Asian American Institute's testimony being submitted today. The upward movement of this group towards north is also part of this social phenomenon, increasing the South Asian population in the near north suburbs of Lincolnwood, Skokie, Morton Grove, Niles and Des Plaines, which are partly encompassed in the "Skokie Area" and "Des Plaines Area" clusters as defined by Asian American Institute. Our religious and educational institutions, social service organizations and many small and large businesses are in these areas. They have their unique social needs and humanitarian issues. There are seniors who could not communicate or participate with the outside world because of the language barrier and become prisoners in their own homes. There are newly immigrated women raising children but lacking communication with their teachers or health care workers because of language and other social hurdles. There are undocumented kids, hundreds of them, suffering for what they haven't done consciously or intentionally. There are even men who couldn't assimilate in the system because of lack of language and social skills or some other communicative problems. There is domestic violence, child and parent abuse which most of the time go unnoticed. These are just a few examples of the growing need for culturally and linguistically appropriate social services, services that are threatened when legislators do not feel accountable to our community.

Honorable members of the committee, our country is going through a critical time which puts national security on top priority. Our security agencies and diplomatic missions need people with multilingual and multicultural skills. By neglecting the local populations of immigrants and their children, we are failing to nurture people who could be very useful for national security and other beneficial purposes.

These social, cultural and educational deficiencies cannot effectively be dealt with by dividing similar populations instead of uniting them.

If you divide communities of interest you promote social and cultural ailments, and if you keep them together you promote a healthy environment for their social and communal growth.

All Asians whichever country or region they come from share lots of common values. They face almost the same problems and hurdles as immigrants. You have the power to facilitate in creating districts which could help these people to get maximum benefit of our system to promote their social, cultural and educational well being. This will help create a healthy state and nation.

Honorable members of the committee let me address something which seems probably not directly related to redistricting but have an indirect relation. I belong to a community which is continuously under surveillance since 911. I will not deny the presence of religious extremism in a minority of the Muslim population, same like it is found in any other faith group but the majority of my community is as American and as liberal as any other person of a different faith. It is easy for extremist elements to take advantage of a discontented, disrespected, disregarded, distressed and divided community by exploiting the injustices and disparities, insecurity and poverty. It is very difficult to take advantage of a united, harmonious and satisfied community. It is you honorable members of the community who can give them this harmony and strength.

Asian American Institute, Council of Islamic Organizations and many grass root organizations are working hard to help the legislators in identifying justified legislative districts. The Pakistani, Indian and Bangla Deshi community of the North side of Chicago endorses these efforts and hope that the legislators would work closely with these grass root organizations

Thank you.

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