

## **March 28, 2011 Testimony to Illinois Senate Redistricting Committee**

I am Sharda Thapa testifying as a member of the Nepali-American community, one of the groups within the Asian American community. I have lived in Chicago for 34 years, 18 of them in the West Rogers Park neighborhood, which is also sometimes called the West Ridge neighborhood. I am a self-employed freelance business consultant who has been active in my community and in Asian-American activities since 1981, mainly in the areas of founding, growing and maintaining social and cultural organizations. Recently, I have become active in civic and political affairs, especially in helping Asian-Americans gain fair representation in elective government and the ability to elect candidates of our choice - an area we have been lacking in.

The Nepali-American community in Chicagoland, including immigrants from Nepal as well as people of Nepali descent, has grown from less than 100 in 1980 to nearly 10,000 now and more than a quarter of them are estimated to reside in the north-northwest section of Chicago and the nearby suburbs like Skokie and Niles. Over time, the population has tended to shift gradually, as people established themselves, from the city to the close-in suburbs and then farther out. The number of immigrants is being augmented by the recent resettlement in the northern part of Chicago of substantial numbers of Nepali-speaking refugees from Bhutan, who are Nepali ethnics driven out in the 1980s, and their families. This is the most notable concentration of the community in the entire area and the phenomenon is closely linked to the growth of the Devon area corridor as a South Asian hub, comprising people of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Nepali descent. As a long-time West Rogers Park resident, I have observed its growing importance to this community because of its concentration of social and cultural institutions, family-owned businesses and immigrant residents. These effective and efficient means of providing much-needed services can only be enhanced if the contiguity is maintained and the institutions receive both credit and funding for providing these services.

Since Nepali-Americans are a relatively new immigrant group, there are no established social service institutions and support organizations targeted to this group. As a result, many in our community who need social services or other resources rely on agencies established with other South Asians or Asians in mind. This is expected to continue.

Nepali-Americans originally arrived here independently as professionals or students or associated with Indian emigrant entrepreneurs, usually as employees. Many of these Nepalis have been helped up by earlier Indian and Pakistani immigrants. There is no travel, work or residency restrictions between India and Nepal and some of these ties continued into the US. The religious, cultural, food and living styles of Nepal are very analogous to India and Tibet, more the former. It is therefore fair to say that all South Asian immigrants would like to remain together and benefit from being within one district or a few districts, rather than being split up into many districts. We could then elect candidates of our choice responsive to our unique needs.

There is cohesiveness within the Asian American community at large. We come from different countries, but we share many cultural and social similarities. For that reason, Asian American Institute

has sought the input of the South Asian community and West Rogers Park community in various projects relating to civic engagement like Census outreach, voter education, and redistricting advocacy.

Nepali-Americans will generally endorse boundaries drawn to respect our community and the other South Asian communities. We are working with AAI to create maps with specific boundaries, and we will give those to you soon.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I urge you to give meaningful consideration to the Asian American community's input and to treat our community fairly during the redistricting process.

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