



**THE COUNCIL
OF ISLAMIC ORGANIZATIONS
OF GREATER CHICAGO**

**Testimony to Illinois Senate Redistricting Committee
Ahlam Jbara, Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago
April 6, 2011**

Good Morning Chairman Raoul and Senators. Thank you for holding this hearing and giving us the opportunity to speak today. My name is Ahlam Jbara and I am the Associate Director of the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago as well as an active member of the Arab and Muslim Community. I am also on the board of Project Mobilize a C4 civic engagement organization; the Arab American Action Network, a social service organization on the south side of Chicago. I have worked and volunteered in our diverse ethnic communities for over 13 years providing social services, teaching English and Citizenship classes, providing leadership development training for the Arab youth, organizing non-partisan civic engagement efforts and worked around issues like racial profiling and language access for limited English speakers.

I am here today on behalf of the CIOGC and our ethnically diverse members; the CIOGC is a membership institution of 53 mosques; full time accredited schools; social service, civil rights and advocacy organizations state wide. The Muslim American community is estimated at 400,000 and growing in Illinois. Muslim Americans are very diverse from native born to minorities from the Arab-American, African-American, African Immigrants, Latino American and Asian-American populations.

There is cohesiveness within the Muslim American community at large. We come from different countries and ethnic backgrounds, but we share many cultural and social similarities. The diverse Muslim community is in various clusters in Chicago and neighboring suburbs. As you heard earlier, the Asian American Institute is testifying today about the growing population of Asians in the Greater West Ridge area of Chicago, as well as the growing Asian population in nearby suburbs such as Skokie and Morton Grove. There is a large Arab Community in the Southwest Suburbs of Bridgeview, Oak Lawn, Burbank, and Justice areas. It is crucial and imperative that our voice and vote not be diluted.

In the above mentioned areas there are schools and institutions that organize our communities that fall under the umbrella of the CIOGC. We have seen and heard the issues that our community members face such as the need for linguistically and culturally appropriate social services, especially for limited English Speakers; the need for cross cultural communications and understanding; the need for increased English and Citizenship services, effectively serving students in schools with high Asian, Arab and African populations, and the need to be heard by our elected officials.

Division of our community through redistricting will erase our voices, and make it even more challenging to organize and unite on common issues. This will in turn affect our ability to conduct voter registration campaigns, mobilize registered voters, and educate our community members about the electoral process. Our social and religious institutions built within already established communities and serve to help disseminate critical information relating to social services like English/citizenship classes, job training programs, social events, political events, youth events, etc. Our communities face a host of common issues such as the need for culturally and linguistically appropriate social services, especially for people with limited English proficiency and people new to this country.

If the district lines divide these integral community institutions, it will be an additional challenge for our community to overcome. District lines will have a direct effect on how responsive elected officials will be to our needs. For example, we have been working to establish relationships with State Senators and Representatives on the Southwest side (city and suburbs) and near the Devon community in Chicago. They understand our issues such as civil rights, zoning, social services, English and citizenship classes, language access, protecting the undocumented and having a voice in the process. Such responsiveness from legislators can only improve if we are united into fewer districts.

The Arab, Asian, African American, and Latino communities have taken initiative over the past few years to organize our community members, develop our youth in civic engagement, increase the number of registered voters, conducting voter education and get out the vote campaigns, increasing our involvement with the electoral process. There are overlapping populations within the Muslim American community and the Asian American community, and there are similar cultural and social concerns that both groups share. For that reason, AAI and other pan-Asian efforts seek input of the Muslim American community during various projects relating to civic engagement, including Census outreach, voter education, and redistricting advocacy.

I hope our testimony today and our years of activism and organizing is taken into account by this committee in the redistricting process. We are unique as an ethnically diverse but still distinct and cohesive community of interest; the CIOGC is focused on the people and our community. We want to be treated fairly during the redistricting process, it is important that the redistricting process is transparent. District lines have a real impact on whether we as minorities can participate in government and make a positive difference in our communities. We want to be grouped together so that we can elect candidates of our choice who can be responsive to our needs. We worked with Asian American Institute to create maps with specific boundaries, and AAI will present those maps to the committee.

Thank you.

Ahlam Jbara
Associate Director
Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago (CIOGC)
231 S. State St. Suite 300
Chicago IL 60604
312-399-3796 (cell)
www.ciogc.org (web)
ajbara@ciogc.org (e-mail)