

Asian Americans for Equality

Public Testimony: New York State Independent Redistricting Commission

Queens County

November 23, 2021

My name is Jennifer Sun and I am submitting testimony to the New York State Independent Redistricting Commission in my role as co-executive director of Asian Americans for Equality (AAFE). For almost a half century, AAFE has been dedicated to advancing racial, social and economic justice for Asian Americans and other systematically disadvantaged communities. We are a comprehensive community development organization with offices in Manhattan and Queens. AAFE is a member of the APA VOICE Redistricting Task Force.

The 2020 U.S. Census showed that Asians are the fastest growing racial group in New York City. In Queens, the Asian population grew by a remarkable 29% from a decade ago.

Now is the time to right a wrong, creating district lines that keep communities of interest whole rather than perpetuating an unfair political map that disenfranchised large swathes of our community. But redistricting in New York will only succeed if all communities of color are fairly represented at every level of government. This is why AAFE joined with the APA VOICE Redistricting Task Force in support of the Unity Map, created by a consortium of voting rights advocacy groups. Across New York City, the map seeks to unite communities of color with shared interests. We believe this emphasis on equity must be prioritized by the redistricting commission and the New York State Legislature.

I would like to bring your attention to the neighborhoods of Elmhurst and Jackson Heights, where AAFE provides housing counseling, social services, senior services and small business loans and training in English, Spanish and Chinese to a multi-racial immigrant community. This community is divided among three state assembly districts in a way that dilutes its political power and deprives it of crucial government resources. We were heartened to see that the "Letters" map from the commission creates an Asian majority district in Elmhurst, Woodside and Jackson Heights, addressing the tremendous growth in the South Asian and Southeast Asian communities in this area.

However, we remain concerned about equitable representation throughout these neighborhoods. The Unity Map addresses these concerns, not only in Northeast Queens but throughout the borough and across our city.

More than half of our clients last year in Queens came from Jackson Heights, Elmhurst and Corona. These are communities with high poverty rates: 15% in Jackson Heights and 10% in Elmhurst. In both communities, at least one-third of renter households were severely rent burdened in 2019. The neighborhoods suffered greatly during the pandemic, from a lack of adequate health care and emergency aid. Through redistricting, we must rectify the systemic failures that make it so difficult for community voices to be heard and for these dynamic neighborhoods to receive the investments in education, health care, senior services, workforce training and housing that they require in order to thrive.

On behalf of AAFE and the 20,000 New Yorkers we serve each year, we urge the commission to adopt the district lines detailed in the Unity Map. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding this process, which will shape all of our futures in the decade to come.