**Testimony of University Settlement
for the New York Independent Redistricting Commission**

November 10, 2021

Submitted by Veronica Wong, Advocacy Director at University Settlement

University Settlement is submitting testimony to ask the New York Independent Redistricting Commission to reconsider their maps for Lower Manhattan. We urge the IRC to keep Manhattan Chinatown, the Lower East Side, and the Wall Street/lower Manhattan area together due to shared interests.

Currently, the “Letters” plan would separate Manhattan Chinatown from neighbors in the Lower East Side, which ignores the many common interests shared by these two neighborhoods. While the “Names” plan keeps Chinatown together, it divides Chinatown from the Wall Street area, where post-9/11, there are shared business and community interests as Wall Street has become more residential. As our organization serves community members in the Lower East Side, in Chinatown, and across lower Manhattan, we have firsthand knowledge of the similar concerns and day-to-day experiences these two neighborhoods share—from the schools and programs their children attend to the places where neighbors shop and frequent.

As the nation’s first settlement house, University Settlement was founded on the Lower East Side over 135 years ago. Now, our programs stretch across lower Manhattan and Brooklyn, but we continue to serve as an anchor organization in the lower Manhattan area. We offer extensive programming including early childhood education, after school and older adults programming, mental health programming for children and families, and tenant advocacy and eviction prevention programs. Across these variety of programs, we connect over 9,000 New Yorkers living in lower Manhattan to essential services, including many Asian and Asian American community members. These participants come to our programs from across lower Manhattan, where Chinese and other Asian languages are the second-most spoken language after English.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In our lower Manhattan communities, the vast majority of participants in many programs identify as Asian or Asian American, and many speak an Asian language at home such as Cantonese or Mandarin, lending us insight into the needs of this community. Our Houston Street Center, located in Chinatown, has always served as a community hub and safe space for our AAPI neighbors, offering a range of safety resources for family members of all ages. Our data and observation indicate a high need for youth programming focused on community education and linguistically competent support services and resources to support the AAPI community.

Separating Manhattan Chinatown from the Lower East Side would make it more difficult for our Asian and Asian American neighbors to join and advocate for their shared community interests. It would potentially mean fewer resources for culturally responsive programming specific to Asian and Asian American needs. As service providers and advocates, it would make it more difficult for us to engage and organize community members living in a neighborhood that is split across two districts. We worry about limited community capacity to explain a needs to a second elected official, which requires additional organizing and additional time from community members.

Lower Manhattan continues to feel the negative impact of Covid-19 on business; Chinatowns across the city suffered earliest due to unfounded and racialized fears early in the pandemic. As post-Covid recovery continues, it is vital that Manhattan’s Chinatown keeps the ability to speak with one voice, particularly as gentrification hits the area even harder than before.

We believe there are alternative maps that would satisfy the district requirements and keep Manhattan Chinatown intact. Keeping Manhattan Chinatown whole with lower Manhattan would be the best for the community members living in lower Manhattan.

Thank you for your time,

Veronica Wong
Advocacy Director

1. #  See: “New York City’s Languages Map by Council District.” *New York City Council.* https://council.nyc.gov/labs/2017/11/08/new-york-citys-languages-map-by-council-district/

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