I stand before you today to offer my perspective on the decennial redistricting process and the community of Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn. The primary goal of redistricting must be to draw maps that authentically reflect the communities that shape our state and the shared priorities that bind them together.  Here in New York, redistricting must be a comprehensive process that yields accurate representation for our people and empowers New Yorkers to reach their maximum potential and thrive in their communities. It is a process that should bring to life the notion of representative democracy in the 21st century.

Today, I would like to talk about the communities of the New York 8th (NY-08) congressional district. This is where I was born. It is where I grew up. It is where I had the honor of serving as an Assemblyman and then a member of the City Council. It is where I have pursued my career as an educator and helped found a community college. I’ve been empowered by this community throughout my entire life and care deeply that the hard-working people in this district have every chance to thrive. To that end, the 8th district is bound together with adjacent neighborhoods that share both communal interests and public services. We are served by the same community board, police precincts, school district, bus and subway lines, firehouses and the same central commercial corridors on Fulton Street and Myrtle Avenue. This district is my home, and it is critically important that my fellow community members are empowered by the redistricting process so that we can continue to benefit from leadership that will best embody and serve the community for years to come.

The current lines of the NY-08 congressional district accomplish this goal. My home, the primarily African-American community of Bedford-Stuyvesant, is part of this district along with the communities of Fort Greene and Prospect Heights. These three neighborhoods are all connected by the commercial corridor along Fulton Street and the same mass transportation systems along the A and C lines. School District 13 includes the neighborhoods of Fort Greene, Clinton Hill, Prospect Heights and parts of Bedford-Stuyvesant.  These are predominantly Black neighborhoods that are protected under the Voting Rights Act. When I served as the Chair of the New York State Black and Puerto Rican Caucus in the Assembly, we challenged the reapportionment process successfully and created this VRA protected congressional seat in Brooklyn. So, I understand the significance of protecting this district and preserving the communities of the 8th congressional district.

Bedford-Stuyvesant, Fort Greene and Prospect Heights are working class, blue-collar communities that share modes of transportation, public services and issues with respect to affordable housing and public safety concerns such as rising gun violence. As “communities of interest,” these neighborhoods have benefited from existing within the same congressional district for approximately five decades. They should remain together during the redistricting process.  Preserving this connectivity would fulfill the legal objective of preserving “communities of interest” and the continuity of representation.

The current lines of the 8th district also include East New York, Canarsie and the southern coast of Brooklyn, including Coney Island. The working-class New Yorkers in these neighborhoods face the same issues regarding housing, schools, transportation and public safety that the rest of the NY-08 communities are confronting on a daily basis.  Additionally, the 8th district represents one of the largest collections of public housing developments contained in a single congressional district. By keeping these developments in a single congressional district, the voices of our people are amplified and their constitutional rights are protected. The current lines of the 8th district give these residents a voice, and new lines that exclude any of these neighborhoods from the 8th district would weaken and dilute that voice and hurt our community.

Finally, it is essential for the proposed map to take into consideration the expressed concerns of the people of Bedford-Stuyvesant, including myself and others. The people of central Brooklyn are optimistic by nature, trained to “make a way out of no way.” They require a democratic process that rewards that optimism and perseverance. To fulfill this promise, the neighborhoods of the 8th congressional district must remain intact.

Keeping our community together will allow each individual to maximize their voice in our democracy and elect leaders whose values are consistent with that voice. For the reasons set forth above, I strongly urge the commission to keep the communities of the NY-08 together in a similar configuration to the current lines. I’m grateful for the opportunity to submit my input this critical topic. Thank you.