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Testimony

By

Orlando R. Ovalles, Northeast Director of Civic Engagement

**National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed
Officials (NALEO) Educational Fund**

before the

New York Independent Redistricting Commission

**New York, New York
March 1, 2023**

Dear Commissioners:

My name is Orlando Ovalles and I am the Northeast Director of Civic Engagement for the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO) Educational Fund. Our organization is the nation's leading non-profit, non-partisan organization that facilitates full Latino participation in the American political process, from citizenship to public service. We are advocating for a redistricting process which results in maps that provide Latinos and other under-represented groups with a fair opportunity to elect leaders who are responsive and accountable to their communities.

We urge this Commission to conduct an accessible, inclusive, and transparent redistricting process. New Yorkers deserve a fair opportunity to provide feedback while engaging with the redistricting process. In particular, we respectfully request that the Commission listen to the voices of community members regarding their communities of interest (COIs) in the state. It is paramount for these COIs to remain intact within the new maps as they share social, economic, and cultural interests, and they would best be served by the opportunity to choose representatives who are knowledgeable and responsive to these shared interests.

It is also imperative that the Commission considers the rapid growth of the Latino community over the last decade as a critical factor in producing maps that safeguard the rights and interests of the Latino community. According to Census 2020 data, Latinos now comprise 19.5 percent of New York's population, up from 17.6 percent in 2010. Latino population growth outpaced the overall increase in New York's population between 2010 and 2020. While New York's population grew by 4.2 percent, the Latino population grew by 15.5 percent. For this reason, it is crucial that the maps produced by the Commission reflect the growth of the Latino community; thus, ensuring that Latinos achieve fair representation by having the opportunity to elect candidates of their choice through the new district lines.

Through our work on "Hagase Contar", a national campaign to ensure a full count of the Latino community across the country, we know that the 2020 Census was unique in many ways. Many of Latino households were severely affected by the pandemic, and faced significant challenges with their health, family responsibilities, and financial well-being. The Census Bureau experienced a pause in normal work and daily operations, which affected the full range of Census activities, from outreach to nonresponse follow-up activities. Additionally, the 'citizenship question' that was proposed by the former Administration, although rescinded, created significant fear in the Latino and immigrant communities about how Census data would be used and the confidentiality and privacy of information provided to the Bureau. This undermined trust in the Bureau's mission and its efforts to count all residents. We do not yet have solid research on how all of the foregoing factors affected Latino response to Census 2020, but based on our experiences with the Latino community, we believe they contributed to the failure of some Latinos to participate in the decennial enumeration. Ultimately, the Commission should also consider that the Bureau found that the Census 2020 undercount of Latinos was a massive and historic 4.99 percent. Therefore, as the Commission conducts its

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line-drawing, it should take into account the growth of the Latino population as well as the potential undercount of the Latino community in New York.

Furthermore, we encourage the Commission to carry out an open and orderly redistricting process that creates an environment which encourages Latinos and other underrepresented groups to fully participate in the democratic process. As a consequence of the chaotic statewide redistricting process that took place throughout 2022, our organization observed substantial voter confusion during last year's primary elections, which may have detrimentally affected the turnout of eligible Latino voters. NALEO Educational Fund also routinely learns from its work and calls to its hotline that Latino voters often lack basic information about the electoral process, and many hotline callers seek information about the proper site to cast their ballot. For this reason, we encourage the Commission to conduct its line-drawing in a transparent manner that enhances trust in our democratic institutions, and provides public education about redistricting and its impact on the electoral process. This approach would ultimately have a positive effect on the political participation of Latinos and other underrepresented groups in New York.

We hope that these recommendations will be useful and seriously considered during the remaining phase of the Commission's efforts during this redistricting process. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and your attention to our comments. We look forward to continuing our work together to ensure a fair and transparent redistricting process in New York.

The logo for NALEO Educational Fund is a large, light gray watermark in the background of the page. It features a stylized 'N' on the left and a large circle on the right. Below the 'N' and circle, the word 'NALEO' is written in a large, white, serif font. Underneath 'NALEO', the words 'Educational Fund' are written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font.

NALEO
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