

Testimony for the New York State Independent Redistricting Commission

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Thank you to the Independent Redistricting Commission (IRC) for organizing this series of public hearings on the upcoming redistricting cycle.

My name is Somia Elrowmeim. I am the executive director of the Women's Empowerment Coalition of New York City. WECNY provide civic, financial, professional, social and other training and resources as means to empower and build capacity. WECNYC is a member of the Mapping Our Future coalition.

Fair districts lay the foundation for fair representation.

The opportunity to draw fair districts only comes once every 10 years. If we don't get this right, our communities will have to live with the consequences for the next decade.

NYC is one of the only places in the world where you can feel so far away from your country of origin, yet feel so at home. Whether it's Little India in Jackson Heights or Little Yemen in the Bronx, or Chinatown in Sunset Park, these communities are the foundation of their districts. Each respective community attracts people with similar interests, ethnic or racial backgrounds, or politically aligned folks. Bayridge is no different. WECNY is located in the heart of a heavily concentrated Arab and immigrant population. We serve the needs of the most vulnerable in our communities. Although we are relatively new, we have served thousands of clients. Many of these clients are often not in our district. The separation of Arab and Muslims from our district by a single block makes our job so much harder due to the bureaucracies that we have to go through solely because they are not in our district.

For example, one of our clients had problems with housing case. Usually, in housing cases, we'd reach out to our local Assembly member, who we have an established relationship with, for assistance. This client, however, was not from Assembly district 51. Her Assembly representative was the only one who could assist her in this matter, even though she lived just a few blocks away from another client we had who lives in the 64th Assembly district. Her Assembly rep was not responsive nor did they prioritize such issues. It took about 4 months for her case to finally be resolved when normally, such cases would take no more than a month or two after Assembly representative intervention.

A good redistricting process can remedy that. Well-drawn districts that keep communities like mine together can protect New York's immigrants and communities of color, allow challengers to have a fair shot at winning elections, and energize civic engagement. It will allow for my community's needs to be prioritized by our elected leaders, resulting in better policy and budget outcomes.

These public hearings are a promising start, but I urge the IRC to consider the entire redistricting process to be a public one. At a minimum this must include:

- More community education events and transparency.
- It cannot go unnoticed that this supposedly democratic process that will have an impact on all New Yorkers does not have translators to allow folks who speak English as a second language to share their stories. To fix that, we need translators and materials to be translated into different languages that all parties involved can understand and engage with.

Thank you for your time and I hope you truly consider the interests of the different communities impacted by having their voices suppressed and separated in this crucial process.

