

Asian Americans for Equality

Public Testimony: New York State Independent Redistricting Commission
Thursday, July 22, 2021 - Queens County Virtual Hearing

Good afternoon, my name is Jennifer Sun. I am testifying today in my role as co-executive director of Asian Americans for Equality (AAFE), a 47-year-old community development organization dedicated to providing greater housing stability and economic opportunity for Asian Americans and other systematically disadvantaged communities. AAFE is part of the APA VOICE Redistricting Task Force, which is advocating through the redistricting process to keep communities with shared interests together.

Each year, AAFE provides multilingual and culturally appropriate community services to 20,000 New Yorkers through our offices in Chinatown/Manhattan, Flushing/Queens and Jackson Heights-Elmhurst/Queens. Today I will be focusing my remarks on Jackson Heights and Elmhurst, where existing district lines have diluted the voices of low-income immigrant communities and deprived these communities of essential public resources.

Our office on 84th Street, steps from Roosevelt Avenue, is located in State Assembly District 39, just below the boundary with Assembly District 34. We serve thousands of residents from both legislative districts, providing housing assistance, Covid emergency cash relief, application assistance for government social services, immigration counseling and ESOL civics classes. More than half of our clients last year in Queens came from just three zip codes: 20% from Jackson Heights (11372), 18% from Elmhurst (11373) and 15% from Corona (11368).

There is no question that Jackson Heights and Elmhurst are communities of interest, with large Asian and Latinx populations who share similar socioeconomic attributes and community needs. We strongly believe that they should be united and made whole through the redistricting process.

These communities' shared interests are obvious to us as grassroots community organizers and service providers, and the data backs up what we see every day on the ground. Both neighborhoods have high poverty rates: 15% in Jackson Heights and 10% in Elmhurst (based on 2019 data). In both communities, at least one-third of renter households were severely rent burdened in 2019, paying more than half of their household income for housing costs. Senior

residents of Elmhurst and Jackson Heights come to AAFE for help with similar issues: enrolling for SNAP benefits, applying for affordable health care, acquiring utility subsidies and reduced rate Metrocards, locating affordable housing and applying for rental assistance.

When communities are artificially divided, their ability to participate in the political process is undermined. But there are other consequences, as well. Because Jackson Heights and Elmhurst are separated, community-based organizations, AAFE included, are underfunded by city government and often hamstrung in their efforts to provide critical social services.

For example, AAFE holds a contract with the NYC Department of Youth & Community Development (DYCD) to provide senior services for Neighborhood Development Area 3. NDA 3 includes Jackson Heights, East Elmhurst, and North Corona. Although we also serve many residents of neighboring NDA 4 - including Elmhurst and South Carona - our work with these clients does not count towards our contract deliverables. Similarly, AAFE holds a DYCD contract to provide housing services for NDA 4 and serves a similar volume of residents living in NDA 3. AAFE is aware of other CBOs turning down contracts to avoid under-performing and underfunding of city contracts for these and other immigrant services.

What these experiences tell us is obvious. Community needs in Jackson Heights and Elmhurst are aligned. Separate representation harms all of our communities by choking off resources for education, affordable housing, transportation and social services. By combining the communities of interest now in Assembly Districts 34, 35 and 39, we can take a major step towards a more equitable New York. A single, unified assembly district across these neighborhoods will help all of us provide comprehensive, culturally-sensitive and language-accessible services for immigrant New Yorkers to thrive.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the New York State Independent Redistricting Commission.