

STATEMENT OF JERRY VATTAMALA  
STAFF ATTORNEY  
ASIAN AMERICAN LEGAL DEFENSE AND EDUCATION FUND  
TO THE NEW YORK CITY DISTRICTING COMMISSION

Public Hearing, January 10, 2013  
Saint Francis College, Founders Hall Auditorium  
180 Remsen Street, Brooklyn, NY 11201

Good evening. My name is Jerry Vattamala, and I am a staff attorney of the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund. AALDEF is a 39-year-old New York-based national organization that protects and promotes the civil rights of Asian Americans through litigation, advocacy, community education, and organizing.

This past year, in coalition with LatinoJustice PRLDEF, National Institute for Latino Policy, and the Center for Law and Social Justice-Medgar Evers College, we developed a Unity Map for New York congressional, state senate, state assembly and New York City Council. The Unity Map for New York City Council was submitted to the Districting Commission on August 30, 2012 and is the only full 51-district citywide proposal that has been submitted to the Commission. The Unity Map complies with all legal requirements, including one person one vote, the Voting Rights Act, and all requirements of the City Charter.

The New York City Charter explicitly lists the criteria to be considered in redistricting, prioritized in list order. The first priority is keeping districts within a 10 percent deviation. The second priority requires this Commission to ensure the fair and effective representation of the racial and language minority groups in New York City which are protected by the Voting Rights Act.<sup>1</sup> The racial and language minority groups protected by the Voting Rights Act are African Americans, Latinos and Asian Americans. The Charter then requires this Commission to keep intact neighborhoods and communities with established ties of common interest and association, whether racial, economic, ethnic or religious.<sup>2</sup> The Commission is required to ensure that Asian Americans will have a full and fair opportunity to elect candidates of their choice, in accordance with the Voting Rights Act of 1965<sup>3</sup> and the New York City Charter.

We are disappointed that the Commission's revised map, released on December 4, 2012, failed to take into account the statements made by numerous advocates and community residents during the first and second round of public hearings in August and October 2012. At the Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens hearings, Asian Americans repeatedly pointed out the changing demographics of their communities and urged the Commission to keep Asian American neighborhoods together within single districts wherever possible. Those statements were not reflected in the preliminary and revised drafts.

### **BROOKLYN**

- 1- Bensonhurst (Districts 38, 43, 44 and 47) - The neighborhood of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, with its fast-growing Asian American population, continues to be divided among four council districts – this configuration is unacceptable and must change. The community

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<sup>1</sup>N.Y. CITY CHARTER, ch. 2-A, Section 52(1)(b) (2004).

<sup>2</sup>N.Y. CITY CHARTER, ch. 2-A, Section 52(1)(c) (2004).

<sup>3</sup> 42 U.S.C. § 1973(b).

defined boundaries of Bensonhurst, as submitted by AALDEF on August 13, 2012 to this Commission, should be kept substantially whole in one district, as demonstrated in the Unity Map, district 47.

The Asian American community in Bensonhurst must first be afforded fair and effective representation before the Commission considers the surrounding communities of interest, as per the mandates of the Charter.

## **MANHATTAN**

- 2- Chinatown and the Lower East Side (Districts 1 and 2) - In Lower Manhattan, Districts 1 and 2, which were created in 1991 as Asian- and Latino-opportunity districts, are now both predominantly white districts. District 1 is 45% white, and the Asian American population has dropped to 36%. District 2 is now 57% white, with only 20% Latino and 11% Asian American residents. It is possible to create an Asian-Latino coalition district to preserve minority representation in Lower Manhattan in the coming decade--without pitting incumbents against each other--but this has not been considered. Numerous community activists and residents from both Chinatown and the Lower East Side testified that the two neighborhoods were one community of interest and should be united in one district. The Unity Map illustrates how this configuration can be achieved.

The Unity Map for congressional districts was substantially adopted and implemented by the federal court. Once again, we urge the Commission to take a closer look at the 51-district Unity Map that AALDEF has submitted with its partners LatinoJustice PRLDEF, National Institute for Latino Policy, and Center for Law and Social Justice-Medgar Evers College, which reflects the changing demographics of New York City. We urge the Commission to ensure that Asian Americans have a full and fair opportunity to elect candidates of choice, in accordance with the Voting Rights Act and to ensure fair and effective representation to New York City's racial and language minorities protected by the Voting Rights Act, as required by the City Charter.