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STATEMENT OF JERRY VATTAMALA
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TO THE NEW YORK CITY DISTRICTING COMMISSION

Public Hearing, October 10, 2012
LaGuardia Community College, Little Theater
31-10 Thomson Avenue, Long Island City, NY 11101

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 38-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 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.¹ 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.² Keeping communities of interest together will 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 1965³ and the New York City Charter.

We are disappointed that the Commission's preliminary map, released on September 4, 2012, failed to take into account the statements made by numerous advocates and community residents during the first round of public hearings in August 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 draft.

QUEENS

- 1- Richmond Hill South Ozone Park (Districts 28 and 32) - The South Asian and Indo-Caribbean communities in Richmond Hill/South Ozone Park, Queens continue to be split in half along Lefferts Boulevard, between districts 28 and 32. The eastern boundary of district 32 should be extended eastward from Lefferts Boulevard to the Van Wyck Expressway as illustrated in the Unity Map.

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

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

³ 42 U.S.C. § 1973(b).

- 2- Elmhurst (Districts 25 and 29) - The southern boundary between districts 25 and 29 has been shifted north, dividing the working class immigrant community of Elmhurst. The Commission should utilize AALDEF's Neighborhood Boundaries to ensure that Elmhurst does not remain divided in half. The Unity Map keeps most of Elmhurst whole in one district with the similar neighboring community of Jackson Heights.
- 3- Bayside (Districts 19 and 23) – Bayside continues to be divided between districts 19 and 23 despite numerous community groups and residents testifying that Bayside should be whole in district 19, as illustrated in the Unity Map.

BROOKLYN

- 4- 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. Bensonhurst should be kept substantially whole in one district, as demonstrated in the Unity Map.

MANHATTAN

- 5- 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 almost six months ago. 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 keep communities of interest together in newly-drawn Council districts, as required by the City Charter.

