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Sustaining Homes  
Strengthening Communities

**STATEMENT OF**  
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TO THE  
NEW YORK STATE LEGISLATIVE TASK FORCE  
FOR DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH AND REAPPORTIONMENT  
August 21, 2012

Good evening – my name is Zarin Ahmed, and I am a Community Organizing Fellow at Chhaya Community Development Corporation (Chhaya); and my name is Rasel Rahman, Community Liason and Outreach coordinator. Based in Jackson Heights, Queens, New York, Chhaya – meaning "shelter or shade" – is dedicated to creating more stable and sustainable communities by increasing civic participation and addressing the housing and community development needs of New York's South Asians, new immigrants and their neighbors. Its work encompasses tenant rights, homeownership, foreclosure prevention, housing rights, civic engagement, and advocating for affordable housing opportunities; as well as research and advocacy around community needs.

South Asians—immigrants from the regions and border areas of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, as well as the diaspora from the Caribbean and other areas—are one of New York City's newest immigrant groups and also one of its fastest growing ethnic populations.

Over the past ten years, Chhaya CDC has assisted more than 3,000 residents – primarily those in the borough of Queens - through its organizing, education and counseling services; and hundreds of thousands through partnerships with the media. Chhaya's eleven staff speak more than five languages including: Bangla/Bengali, Hindi, Nepali, Tibetan, & Urdu.

As civic engagement is a core component of Chhaya's mission, I am here today to share some of our findings about where concentrations of the South Asian community reside and the common interests residents share in order to ensure that this population has equal opportunity to elect candidates of their choice.

With a clear undercount in the recent Census, we feel our contributions to this planning process are extremely critical in ensuring that the Task Force takes into account these underrepresented communities. South Asians and other immigrant residents of Queens face some of the most challenging housing and economic conditions in the City and need adequate access to the political process in order to confront these challenges and continue to contribute to the City's economy.

**Population estimates**

Based on the census, the Asian population in New York City is the fastest growing group increasing by 32 percent since 2000, from 783,058 to 1,034,399 (except for Native Americans and Alaska Natives which grew from a very small base) and by 110 percent increased since 1990. South Asians are 29 percent percentage of the city's Asian population – and grew by 159 percent.

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Indians continue to be the largest ethnic group within the South Asian category, and following the Chinese community, the second largest Asian community in New York City with a population of 192,209. The Bangladeshi community tripled in size since 2000, seeing the second highest growth rate, surpassing Pakistanis as the second largest South Asian category with 53,174 members. Pakistanis are now the third largest ethnic group within the South Asian American population in New York City at 41,887; followed by Nepali at 5,681, Sri Lankans at 3,696 and Bhutanese at 345. The Indo-Caribbean population is potentially among the largest of these groups, however the census data does not collect information for this community. Based on our knowledge of the community, these numbers actually do not fully reflect the population size of South Asians in the City.

What these numbers do show is the rapid growth in the community, and the need for adequate representation. The South Asian community to date has no representation on the City, State or Congressional levels of New York City - despite its growing impact and influence.

### **South Asian Communities of New York City**

In 2010, Chhaya CDC conducted an on-the-ground survey of 430 South Asian residents of New York City. The following neighborhoods were the top neighborhoods of residents of respondents (made up of 40% Bangladeshi, 21% Indian, 12% Nepali, 9% Guyanese or Trinidadian, 7% Pakistani, and 5% Sri Lankan) in Queens:

- Woodside, Queens
- Jackson Heights, Queens
- Jamaica/Briarwood, Queens
- Flushing, Queens
- Elmhurst, Queens
- Astoria, Queens
- Sunnyside, Queens
- Ozone Park, Queens
- South Richmond Hill, Queens
- Richmond Hill, Queens
- Ridgewood, Queens

In addition the following neighborhoods have high concentrations of South Asian residents:

- Kensington, Brooklyn
- Parkchester, Bronx

These communities represent communities with a common cultural background, economic status, language and countries of origin – all factors to consider in drawing district lines.

In addition to the common cultural backgrounds and countries of origin, the challenge of the current housing crisis should also be considered when evaluating appropriate district lines. The Borough of Queens will continue to face grave challenges ahead in the areas of housing. Chhaya conducted a city-wide survey of 440 South Asians in 2010 (full report attached). Renters in many communities face grave challenges in terms of access to safe and decent housing, lack of legal rights due to informal housing conditions and harassment in the face of

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gentrification. In addition, thousands of homeowners will continue to struggle to keep their homes. These communities were targeted by predatory lenders, and today, continue to be targeted by rescue scam lenders promising a solution.

### **Renters facing gentrification and lacking rights**

Seventy percent of respondents our survey were renters. These renters – identified a number of challenges – some related to harassment within rent regulated buildings as they impact of gentrification and others living in informal housing situations lacking rights. Some of the most alarming findings were:

- 65% live in overcrowded conditions
- 50% of respondents did not have a lease
- 41% paid rent in cash , and 60% did not receive a receipt for this payment

### **Ramped foreclosures in distinct communities of Queens.**

Foreclosure filings in the Borough of Queens continue to occur and overall and then the additional three maps include three communities of particular need: Jackson Heights/Elmhurst, Briarwood-Jamaica Hills/Jamaica, and Richmond Hill Ozone Park.

- 69% of owners purchased in the last 10 years – 37% in the last 5 years
- 60% of respondents saw their income drop after purchasing their home
- South Asians made up a high percentage of those in foreclosure. Primarily in: Briarwood/Jamaica, South Ozone park, Queens Village/Bellerose Terrace, Woodside, Jackson Heights, Elmhurst, Kew Gardens, and Jamaica – ranging from 17% to 65%.

These communities will need adequate representation over the coming years as they struggle to recover by addressing bad mortgages combined with loss of income.

### **Conclusion – Keeping Asian American and South Asian American Communities of Interest Together**

We urge this Task Force to take a closer look at these neighborhoods and ensure that South Asian and Asian American communities are kept together and not splintered among newly-drawn districts. We support AALDEF's Asian American Neighborhood Boundaries and Communities of Interest Survey, which lists the clusters and shared concerns/issues among certain Asian American communities.

There are four neighborhoods with high concentrations of South Asians that we urge the Task Force to keep together in the re-districting process in Queens: Bellerose, Floral Park, Queens Village and Glen Oaks, Briarwood & Jamaica Hills, Richmond Hill & South Ozone Park, and Jackson Heights & Elmhurst

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