

LRC Commission Hearing on Redistricting

**Testimony presented by: Kadida Kenner, Executive Director, New Pennsylvania Project
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Good afternoon, Chairman Nordenberg and Commissioners, I would like to thank you for allowing me to speak and provide testimony this afternoon. I would also like to commend your work, thus far, in this process. Yours is a thankless job, but it is one of the most important processes that is done at the state level, that directly impacts every single resident in our Commonwealth.

My name is Kadida Kenner. I was born in Monroeville, Allegheny County. Both my parents are Pitt graduates - I'm the outcast and proud Temple Owl. I grew up in West Chester, Chester County, historical home to the Underground Railroad and civil rights icon Bayard Rustin. I recently moved after living in Susquehanna township, Dauphin County for five years. I currently reside less than a mile from Valley Forge National Park.

I am the founding executive director of the New Pennsylvania Project. The New Pennsylvania Project is a voting rights organization, operating statewide, with the primary purpose of voter registration. It is our mission to register as many of the 1.1 million Pennsylvanians who are eligible to vote yet not registered to vote in the Commonwealth and mobilize them to vote in every single election.

We canvass neighborhoods, knock on doors, listen to concerns about housing, economic justice, and fairly funded public schools, in often ignored and underrepresented communities, particularly communities of color. We register these folks to vote and encourage their participation to actually cast their ballot.

We believe that participation in our democracy is foundational to the American experience. But for far too long, that participation has not been reflected in those who represent us.

In Pennsylvania, our growth is driven by people of color - Black, brown, Latinx, and AAPI residents. That's not my opinion. That's an absolute fact. And these emerging populations are choosing to live in vibrant, smaller cities within our state such as Lancaster, Allentown, Scranton, and Erie.

Our commonwealth is at a point of crisis due to underrepresentation.

If our state legislature were truly representative of our state's population, then at least one in every four state legislators would be a person of color. Instead, we have a General Assembly that is 90% white. This is due, in part, to decades of elected officials picking their voters - and not the other way around.

I'd like to provide a little perspective for anyone wondering why this matters so much.

For someone who is a native-Spanish speaker, living in Reading, and in need of help, calls their state representative or senator looking for information about the LIHEAP program, but no one in that office speaks Spanish, or thinks to hire bilingual staff who could effectively help their constituents get the help they need to heat their home - that's a representation issue.

If a Black woman from Chambersburg faces unjust discrimination in the workplace for wearing her natural hair but finds herself unprotected because there are no laws on the books, or proposed legislation from her elected officials - whose job it is to represent all their constituents - that's a representation issue.

In many cases, the current maps carve people of color out of their own communities, to make way for safe incumbent seats, or pack people of color together to limit their influence and minimize opportunities for the maximum candidates of color. This is no way to govern, and it ensures that communities of color stay underrepresented in the building in which I appear today.

What makes me hopeful for the future is that the LRC has proposed a House map that corrects the injustices of past maps. The proposed map improves on the current map by every good government redistricting standard there is. It gives opportunity for new voices to rise and lead. It opens a door that was previously inaccessible and bolted shut.

I strongly urge the Commission to adopt the proposed House map and give communities of color a chance to elect leaders that look like them, value what they value, and experience life in Pennsylvania as people of color do.

Change is hard. It can feel uncomfortable, even oppressive. But our legislative maps must change as our population changes. There is a reason we go through the reapportionment and redistricting process every 10 years after a new Census. And unfortunately, when the maps are as skewed as the current maps are, any effort to correct them will feel like an affront on those feeling as though they're losing power. But we must pursue fairness, even when it is difficult.

I want to commend the work of Chairman Nordenberg and the Commissioners and staff for keeping this process moving in a fair and nonpartisan fashion.

I'm happy to answer questions.