

Testimony of Arlene V. Edmonds
Legislative Reapportionment Hearing
Friday, January 7, 2022

As an active member of my community, I have recently been bombarded with questions and concerns about what redistricting is and how it will affect individual Pennsylvania voters. I am in contact with citizens from all walks of life. I have owned my home in Northwest Philadelphia for more than 30 years—basically my whole adult life—and I have been an active member of community.

As a news correspondent I wrote more than 10,000 articles for virtually all the community newspapers in the Philadelphia region for 30 years. I have also participated in the Philadelphia School Council, registered voters and oversaw volunteers during a presidential race, taught thousands of college students as a university adjunct for 12 years, taught piano and dance at community centers, and have been a volunteer for redistricting focused groups for the past two years. As a mother of two voting daughters, grandmother of four, and a neighborhood activist I am here to speak for my family and many other community voices.

I want to note that the new House maps are overall a significant improvement over the existing ones. However, I still have concerns about how the proposed House and Senate maps will impact my neighborhood district.

Since Philadelphia is a city of neighborhoods, redistricting should avoid splitting wards to the greatest extent possible. Communities of color, particularly the African American and Latino ones, must not be cracked or packed into legislative districts that disempower our vote. This means when legislative lines are drawn, they should stay in municipal lines when possible.

I know this first-hand since I live a couple of blocks from Philadelphia's northern city line. Even though I often cross the city line to get to the nearest supermarket or bank, most of my life is impacted by what happens on the Philadelphia side of the line. If I call 911 the Cheltenham police picks up, because their tower is closest to my house, but I am immediately transferred to the Philadelphia Police Department. Though Cheltenham High is in walking distance of my house that is the not designated public school for the children on my block. Consequently, our voting district should also stay within municipal lines. Districts should be compact so that all citizens get their issues addressed and resolved. The cracking of voters across urban and suburban lines in Philadelphia should be reduced as much as possible. I worry that these new maps do a poor job of appropriately representing the socioeconomic diversity of my neighborhood.

The division of voters across county lines is even more evident in the Far Northeast section of Philadelphia as well as West and Southwest Philadelphia. The Far Northeast is adjacent to Bucks County. While that area is urban, nearby Bucks County is largely farmlands.

Those in the densely populated areas in West and Southwest Philadelphia have more similar issues than those who reside in the adjacent Delaware County or Philadelphia Main Line in western Montgomery County. So, these Philadelphia residents would have their issues better met if they were in the same district within the city. The new maps make some improvement, but still provide too much care for incumbents, which disadvantages growing populations elsewhere.

Lastly, considerations should be given to the cultural demographics of communities. If, for instance, there are citizens who are more comfortable communicating in Spanish, French, or other languages but they live across a city line or current district line, then some accommodations could be made so that they are in the same district. This is the case for neighborhoods east of where I reside where some of these populations live across the city line along East Cheltenham Avenue. This also is the case in other parts of the city and region. These neighborhoods have Asians, Africans, and Caribbean and South Americans who speak many languages and live across a city/suburban line. This would ensure that their unique concerns are addressed.

Consequently, I would hope that this commission would carefully take all these points in consideration. Redistricting should be done fairly. The diversity of Pennsylvania must be treated justly. This will ensure that all citizens, including voters of colors, are represented. In fact, I would hope Pennsylvania, with all its diversity, would be leading the nation in this regard.