

Testimony of Wesley Gadsden (Allegheny Regional Hearing)

Hello members of the House State Government Committee and thank you for taking the time to read my testimony.

My name is Wesley Gadsden, I am the Statewide Field Director at One Pennsylvania, a Community Organization that works within a broad coalition of labor, faith, and students' organizations fighting to make powerful changes that transform our communities.

We amplify voices in communities that are underpaid and underserved in our current economy. We educate and mobilize our neighbors to become informed and active voters.

We are excited to have this once in a decade opportunity to make the congressional reapportionment process more inclusive and equitable than it has been in the past, resulting in racially equitable maps and a state legislature that is representative of, and accountable to, the community it serves.

From our extensive statewide work on racial equity, voting rights and access, and civic engagement, we know that elections are decided before anyone has the opportunity to vote.

It is crucial that there is racial equity in the 2021 redistricting process to ensure equality of rights and representation that reflects the racial and ethnic demographics throughout the commonwealth.

We need to use the time we have before the census data from 2020 is released to actively and meaningfully engage with all of our BIPOC communities across the state, and we need to truly listen to what they have to tell us. So we will be able to produce truly equitable results.

It is critically important that the House State Government Committee operates in a wholly transparent manner and allows for meaningful public input into this process.

Holding 8 public hearings across the commonwealth before the census data is released is a great first step, but it must also hold at least two more afterward the September 30th data release date.

These meetings must be scheduled well in advance and provide options for virtual participation to ensure that everyone who wants to testify has the opportunity.

Interpretation must be offered for the increasing numbers of Pennsylvanians who are experts in their communities but speak a variety of languages besides English.

We must set a standard for robust community engagement throughout the map drawing process. This means actively reaching out, educating, and seeking feedback from impacted communities...not just giving symbolic opportunities to speak here and there without much notice

We need to engage communities of color as active participants in determining how voting maps are drawn.

Community Members/Voters want to see political maps drawn in 2021 that reflect the rapidly changing demographics of our commonwealth and create opportunities for Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color, which historically have been undercounted in the census and often left out of the redistricting discussion.

In order to produce a truly equitable result, we have to throw out the old maps and start the process from scratch.

Pennsylvania's voting maps need to give voice to ALL of our communities, especially those who have been excluded from the process in the past.

We need to see maps that uphold the democratic ideal of "one person, one vote" – maps that have been drawn with racial equity as a core value.

That begins not with the final maps, but with the process.

Current district lines still do not account for changes in PA demographics.

Communities of color in Pennsylvania are growing at 12 times the rate of the white population.

Although people of color make up 23% of Pennsylvania's total population, as of 2018 its highest law-making body – the state Legislature – was 89% white

We have to create seats at the table so that these communities get the representation they deserve and are constitutionally entitled to.

Both parties have been complicit in drawing voting districts that disadvantage Pennsylvania's communities of color, by choosing their voters rather than allowing the voters to choose their representatives.

BIPOC communities deserve the opportunity to elect representatives that reflect their community's interest.

Maps that are not drawn with racial equity as a guiding principle will never be "fair" in any meaningful sense of the term.

This isn't a partisan issue.

We all must work together to do what we all can to ensure the political maps this time around are fair and equitable.