



September 21, 2021

Dear Chairperson Silverman and Members of the DC Council Sub-Committee on Redistricting:

We are writing to express our deep concerns on the harmful impact redistricting might have on Black voters in Southwest and DC wide as well as to issue a call for action to avoid it.

We live in Southwest and are members of SW Action, which organizes and advocates to assure our beloved community is steadfastly anti-racist, equitable, accessible and environmentally sustainable for all. We exist because from 1954, when the U.S. Supreme Court sanctioned the razing of and [uprooting](#) of 23,000 predominantly Black SW families, to the gerrymandering by gentrification of today, Black residents still experience [racist housing conditions](#), and environmental health threats. This is most true for those who are young, poor, have disabilities, and our elders. We seek to reverse this trend and obtain justice in our community.

SW is home to the largest number of people living in public housing in DC. Unfortunately, many of the individuals and families living in it have already been forced to move. Even more will need to do so due to [unregulated gentrification](#) and the refusal of the Housing Authority to make critical repairs or conduct [lifesaving lead abatement](#) in their homes. Some might believe “these people do not vote anyhow” and redistricting matters little to their lives and futures. In fact, the exact opposite is true. People know they count when they know their vote counts. Voting improves the lives of people, their children and our community. Those who vote are [more likely to report](#) feeling healthy, exercising, being connected, and having a positive outlook on the future. Yet racism, poverty, and other barriers [robs the power of the vote from many](#).

For all these reasons, the Council must recognize DC redistricting for what it is: A high stakes gamble for Black and other disenfranchised people in SW and DC. One that can either acknowledge and make amends for past and present inequities or inexorably exacerbate them. To do simple justice, therefore, the Council must adopt a DC redistricting plan that assures rather than thwarts electoral equity.

According to preliminary results of the 2020 Census, DC's total population grew by [nearly 88,000 people](#) (14.6%) and its racial [composition](#) also has changed dramatically since 2010. Black people went from making up 50% of the city's residents a decade ago to about 41% today. About 38% of all DC residents responding to the 2020 Census identified as White and the remaining 12% identified as being of another race or multi-racial. Those who identified as being Hispanic made up the largest share of this latter cohort ([here](#)).

The most of these findings clearly are:

- Black residents while no longer making up the majority make up a significant plurality of those living in our city.
- Furthermore, Black people and people of color make up the majority (53%) of all DC residents ([here](#)).

In [Ward 6](#), while the overall population grew by about 32,000, accounting for a third of DC's entire population increase, the number of Black residents living here declined by about 9% from 2010 and 2020. So it is clear that simple population growth is not just increasing the number of residents, it is changing the very racial make-up of the city. There is no question that both in respect to the city as a whole and Ward 6 specifically that these demographic shifts have been and will continue to be driven by unbridled gentrification, skyrocketing housing costs, and, frankly, corporate and political greed. The impacts these forces have upon waning the political influence of DC residents who are Black, disabled, non English speaking, working poor, and/or otherwise disenfranchised are likely to prove to be profound.

This city is a very multi-racial, multicultural one. Any plan must assure the voting rights and power of Black and other historically marginalized voters are not diminished citywide or at the ward level. Achieving it is challenging, but the Council must do its utmost to strive towards this balance.

Given the large increase in Ward 6's population, its boundaries will clearly need to be redrawn to remain in line with the DC charter. A large number of those now living in Ward 6 are likely to be assigned to other Wards. We recognize the need to take these actions, but they must be ones that can be realistically expected to assure greater equity in DC, the Ward, and in Southwest DC.

Consideration also must be given to what redistricting and reassigning various parts of SW to different Wards, the smallest and most distinctive quadrant, would have on its character, historic diversity, and future inclusivity. Prior to the 1950's and 60's when our neighborhood was destroyed and all its residents forced to leave, SW was a multi racial, multicultural, and vibrant neighborhood where all lived together as neighbors. That sense of community and belonging has been severely challenged over time but it has never left. It is at the heart of who we strive to be as a people and as a neighborhood. Many invest their lives, love, wisdom, and hard

work in making certain this heart beats strong. Redistricting must be done in a way that does not undercut our work.

We call on the Council to legally require the redistricting plan to meet the following mandates:

The redistricting plan must be implemented in time to ensure all DC voters are correctly assigned to their ward/precinct and have the same opportunity to vote in the June 2022 Primary. The 2022 primary will decide the next Mayor and Council. It is, therefore, vital that all required actions be taken to implement the plan by then or its implementation must be delayed. Every DC voter must have the equal right to vote for those that will represent them.

Ensure Fair Distribution of Black and Minority Voting Power. As stated above, the plan must assure that the voting rights and power of Black and other historically marginalized voters are not diminished or violated, either citywide or at the ward level. Careful consideration must be given to the consequences of shifting Southwest into any other Ward before any final decisions are made. The plan must demonstrate how it would preserve the voting power of Black and Brown voters in SW and the city.

Include an Electoral Equity Impact Statement. Before adopting any plan, the Council should prepare an impact statement, post in ways to ensure wide access to the results, solicit public comments and recommendations, and hold hearings on its analysis of the ways and the extent to which the plan will advance electoral equity in DC for decades.

While it is beyond the Subcommittee's charge, we also call on the Council and the Mayor to join with religious, neighborhood, business, philanthropic, and other organizations in DC to develop and carry out a strategy to eliminate the disparity between the voter registration and voting rates that exist among Black and White and other DC residents ages 18 and older. According to Census data, almost 87% of DC residents are registered to vote and 84% voted in the [November 2020 election](#). While these rates are among the highest in the country, they obscure the fact that Black eligible voters had an [8% lower voter registration rate](#) and thus, voted less in 2020 compared to White non-Hispanic residents. These gaps must be closed before the upcoming Council elections and the very consequential 2022 Mayoral election.

If we aspire to become the Douglass Commonwealth, we must realize Frederick Douglass' lifelong quest for universal suffrage and equity for all. Redistricting is one tool to achieve those ends. We look forward to communicating with this sub-committee further, and would appreciate your response to our concerns and proposals by September 30, 2021. We understand the December decision-making deadlines this body faces, and so we reiterate the urgency of this issue. Please let us know when we will be able to meet with you or your staff on this critical issue.

Whatever plan the Council approves will shape the future and vitality of DC and all who make it our home for decades to come. We thank you for your diligence and integrity in doing this work.

Sincerely,

SW Action
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cc: Phil Menderson, Chair of the DC Council
Charles Allen, DC Councilmember Ward 6
The DC Council Committee of the Whole