



Latino & Puerto Rican Affairs Commission Leads Coalition to Fight Prison Gerrymandering

[Embargoed until 2/10/16 – 11:00 a.m.]

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 10, 2016

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The Latino & Puerto Rican Affairs Commission (LPRAC), legislators, and a coalition of civil rights & good government groups (i.e., the Hispanic Federation of Connecticut; Prison Policy Initiative; the American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut; League of Women Voters of Connecticut, & Common Cause in Connecticut; and a number of lawmakers.) call for an end to prison gerrymandering in Connecticut — a practice that results in unequal representation across Connecticut — in the current legislative session.

Richard Cruz, Chairperson of LPRAC and resident of Bridgeport, said, “For too long, Black and Latino communities have been robbed of their full political representation in Connecticut. This ends in 2016. The Commission, and its allies on this issue, will do everything in their power to end prison gerrymandering in Connecticut to the benefit of the overwhelming number of state residents – not just Latinos. Other states have ended prison gerrymandering and Connecticut must follow their example.”

Prison gerrymandering refers to the practice of counting prisoners as residents of the town where they are incarcerated instead of where they lived prior to incarceration. This enhances the representation of prison towns in the legislature without increasing their number of constituents. A more politically impartial alternative is to count prisoners in their last known town of residence before they went to prison.

For example, in the Town of Somers, 20 percent of the town's population lives in local prisons and most of these incarcerated people lived in other towns before going to prison in Somers. In some Connecticut towns, the prison population may be the largest population, or a sizable portion, of a local political district. Consequently, local governments often exclude their prison population from their local population count for purposes of political representation. In Connecticut, the Town of Cheshire uses only registered voters to draw municipal district boundaries; otherwise, the prison population, which cannot vote, would account for 20 percent of the population in one local district. If Enfield counted their prison population in local political districts, 30 percent of the total population in Enfield's 3rd District would be non-voting prisoners.



Voters in Enfield's 3rd District would then be better represented because every 7 residents in the 3rd District, where the prison is located, would have the same political representation as 10 residents in all other districts in Enfield. Enfield resolved this unbalanced representation by excluding the prison population when drawing the town's local district boundaries. LPRAC has said it will marshal the forces of their Commission to restore equal political representation to all affected communities across the state by continuing its successful non-partisan approach to engaging legislators, citizens, and non-traditional partners on policy issues. This initiative to end prison gerrymandering has been endorsed by good government and civil rights groups across the state.

Werner Oyanadel, Executive Director of the Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission, said, "After concentrating the prison population in eleven towns, the prison population is then used to artificially increase the political power of these few towns at the expense of the communities where these incarcerated people had previously lived. This is contrary to the principle of equal representation. We look forward to a public hearing on this important proposal."

Ingrid Alvarez-DiMarzo, Connecticut State Director of the Hispanic Federation, said, "Our communities are constantly changing. With those changes, come demographic shifts that need to be properly represented in the way our district lines are drawn so as not to disenfranchise any voting bloc through underrepresentation. However, gerrymandering too often achieves the opposite goal of further disenfranchising communities; especially those that are majority Black or Latino. Our process for redistricting must be fair and empowering rather than maintaining the political status quo. Prison gerrymandering is among the most exploitative and unjust political processes. We must put an end to it in 2016."

David McGuire, Legislative and Policy Director for the American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut, said, "The practice of prison gerrymandering undermines the vital American principle of equal representation, and this has to stop."

Gloria Bent, President of the League of Women Voters of Connecticut, said, "The League of Women Voters of Connecticut believes it is vital that legislative districts reflect the diversity of the population they represent and serve; especially with regard to racial and ethnic diversity. Therefore, the League believes that, for districting purposes, incarcerated people should be counted in their hometown population and not in the communities where they are incarcerated."

Peter Wagner, Executive Director of the Prison Policy Initiative, said, "Four states and more than 200 rural counties and municipalities already exclude prison populations. This includes the Connecticut towns of Cheshire and Enfield, both of which reject the idea that incarcerated people from Bridgeport, Hartford, or New Haven are local residents of the town where they happen to be incarcerated. Both Cheshire and Enfield prevent prisons from skewing democracy on their town council. The state should follow their lead to ensure that all Connecticut residents have equal representation in the state legislature."



Cheri Quickmire, Executive Director, Common Cause in Connecticut, said, “Connecticut state law says that incarcerated people are residents of their homes, not the prison location. It is time to pass legislation and send the message that every Connecticut resident deserves the same representation, regardless of whether or not he or she lives near a big prison.”

State Senator Eric D. Coleman – Co-Chair of Judiciary and Deputy President Pro Temp – “This issue merits the attention of our state legislature,” said Sen. Eric Coleman, Senate Chair of the Judiciary Committee. “Because of the compelling information that has been assembled, I will advocate raising a proposed bill for a public hearing, so that my colleagues will have an opportunity to hear from the experts, review the evidence, and consider the appropriate course of action for Connecticut.”

State Representative Edwin Vargas – 6th Assembly District, Hartford. “I am very interested in today’s discussion – particularly as it affects my constituency in Hartford,” stated Rep. Vargas. “People leave prison on almost a daily basis and return to their hometowns across Connecticut. Regrettably, people who were incarcerated and paid all their debt to society are still considered to be living in the same prison for purposes of political representation even if they completed their sentence and returned to their hometown. To ensure they regain their political representation in the legislature when they complete their sentence, we should count the incarcerated population as residents of their hometowns across the state and not in the prison town where they happen to be when the census is taken once every ten years.”

LPRAC is a nonpartisan policy agency within the legislative branch of government created in 1994 by an act of the Connecticut Legislature (i.e., P.A. 94-152, amended by P.A. 03-229 and amended by P.A. 09-07). Under Public Act 09-07, LPRAC consists of 21 appointed community leaders that are mandated to advise the Connecticut General Assembly and the Governor on policies that foster progress in the Latino communities residing in Connecticut.