



*Holding Power Accountable*

Written Testimony of Keshia Morris Desir,  
Justice & Democracy Manager, Common Cause (National)

March 6, 2024

**Support SF 3878**

Dear Chair, Sen. Carlson and members of the Senate Elections Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on behalf of Common Cause and its 1.5 million members and supporters across the United States. My name is Keshia Morris Desir, Common Cause's Justice and Democracy Manager. I work alongside Annastacia Belladonna-Carrera in Minnesota, and our executive directors across 30 states to create solutions that make our democracy more fair, and accessible. I also led Common Cause's 2020 Census efforts.

***Common Cause supports SF 3878, however would encourage returning to original bill language in Section 1(5)(c).*** The author's amendment requires a strict address match. Adding guidance for the geocoding process in general is a best practice, but the limitations on geocoding results in the author's amendment requires perfection in both the address data, and the mapping software. All states have encountered minor errors and typos in their address data. Keeping this provision will likely significantly reduce the effectiveness of the bill. Allowing some leeway in the geocoding process has produced better reallocation success while still maintaining a high quality of redistricting data.

Democracy works best when every person, regardless of what they look like, where they live, or how much they make, has an equal voice in determining the direction of our country. But for too long, our shameful history of policing and mass incarceration has undermined that ideal. Compounded with redistricting processes, the needs of the most marginalized communities have repeatedly been overlooked.

Minnesota has a chance to take a step towards equally representing every person that lives within the state. Prison gerrymandering deprives communities—especially communities of color—of their constitutional right to equal representation.

The criminal justice system in Minnesota incarcerates Black Americans at a rate of almost 10 times the rate of white people, and Latinx Americans at nearly 2 times the rate

of the white population.<sup>1</sup> This means that when incarcerated people of color are then counted as residents of prison communities for redistricting, it leads to artificial and arbitrary transfers of power that dilute the political influence of communities of color and inflate the power of predominately white areas where prisons are located. With the exclusion of St. Cloud with a white population of more than 67%, incarcerated people in Minnesota were counted in just 6 districts that were more than 75% white, while we know that incarcerated people come from all over the state where more diverse populations reside.

The 2020 Census counted more than 8,000 Minnesotans in state correctional facilities in the wrong place – at the location of the prison, instead of their home communities. It is critical to fair and accurate representation that all Minnesotans be counted at home, including incarcerated people.

Every person deserves to have fair representation, it is critical that you pass SF 3878 . Reforming prison gerrymandering is about consistency, accuracy, and fairness. The Census Bureau relies on family and community ties to count other people at home (e.g., truck drivers, boarding school students, Congress, military personnel), even when they are away for long periods of time but fails to apply the same rules to incarcerated people.

Voters across parties and geographies agree on the need to correct prison gerrymandering. After the 2020 Census, over a dozen states including Montana, Virginia, and Illinois, counted incarcerated people at their last known address instead of the location of the prison. We urge Minnesota to join the 47% of the country that counts their incarcerated population at home, and are now more fairly represented.<sup>2</sup>

Ending prison gerrymandering will not affect the level of funding that communities receive from the federal government. This reform is about accurate redistricting and equal representation for all communities in Minnesota—black, white, and brown.

Thank you for your consideration of SF 3878 as a critical step towards an inclusive democracy.

*Keshia Morris Desir*

Justice & Democracy Manager  
Common Cause  
202-736-5774  
Kmorris@commoncause.org

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sentencingproject.org/research/detailed-state-data-tool/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.prisonersofthecensus.org/news/2021/10/26/state\\_count/](https://www.prisonersofthecensus.org/news/2021/10/26/state_count/)