

Testimony of Queens Community House
Committee on Governmental Operations
Council Member Fernando Cabrera, Chair
Introduction 1867 - Municipal Voting Rights
September 20, 2021

Queens Community House is proud to submit our testimony on behalf of Introduction 1867 to expand voting rights in New York City elections to nearly one million noncitizen New Yorkers.

On November 2nd, many of us will have the opportunity to participate in one of the most fundamental rituals of our democracy. We get to vote for our local representatives (mayor, controller, public advocate, city councilperson, borough president). These are the people who, over the next four years, will make many of the decisions that impact our day-to-day lives – decisions relating to public education; housing; transportation, roads and infrastructure; parks and communal spaces; and healthcare and social services. They are the people who will get to decide how to spend our tax money, and in doing so determine what is a priority for our society – and what it not.

But many of our neighbors in Queens will be unable to participate in this process because they do not yet have citizen status. They are here legally, and as such they pay taxes at the same rate as all of us. But they have no say in how their tax money is spent. Their children attend our public schools – but they have no say in our education policy. Many are active members of our communities – they work, own businesses, go to church/temple/mosques, attend community board meetings, and volunteer for non-profit organizations. But their positions and values are not expressed politically in any way.

This is not only unfair to them; it is disadvantageous to all of us, and a misrepresentation of democracy. If we truly embrace the principle of democracy, then we must recognize its value is not just for the individual but for the whole of society. We must also acknowledge that full democracy in this country has never been a reality but rather an ideal. Many of the groups who now have voting rights (women, African-Americans, Chinese-Americans, etc.) did not have them for much of our nation's history. Our country has slowly made progress over 250 years towards a *real democracy* (at times two steps forward, one step back as we're still seeing today), but there have been moments where we have made huge leaps, in particular the suffragette movement of the early 20th century and the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s. It is time for another such leap, and noncitizen voting in local elections is the first step.

We know from experience that our communities are strongest, safest, and best served when they have the participation of all their residents. As the old adage says, with power comes responsibility. If we want our neighbors to be engaged citizens, we have to offer them participation in one of our most basic mechanisms for decision-making – the vote. Local elections do not decide foreign policy, they do not determine international relations or how we defend ourselves from enemy nations; they decide local matters and the use



Strengthening Neighborhoods Inspiring Change

of locally-collected taxes. Many of the neighborhoods in Queens we serve are under-resourced, primarily because the true size of their resident base is unrepresented at the table. This must change.

Queens Community House serves 25,000 residents in 14 different Queens neighborhoods across Queens each year. Queens is arguably the most diverse county in the United States and, in many ways, it represents our future in a global world: one where people from many different countries live side by side, sharing concerns, aspirations, and a common humanity if not a common passport. In this world, municipal voting rights will not undermine national identity but will instead strengthen a country's communities and enjoin everyone in a universal human nation that must respond to rising planetary challenges (such as the COVID and climate change crises). New York City is one of the world's first universal cities, and as such we have both an opportunity and an obligation to lead the way.

Queens Community House therefore urges the City Council to hold a vote and pass this critical legislation. Thirty-three Council Members have put their names on this bill as sponsors. We ask all City Council Members to give their voices to ensure that all of our neighbors have a voice. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to testify on this pivotal bill.