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Dear Members of the Kansas House and Senate Redistricting Committees,

Safe Streets Wichita is a substance misuse prevention coalition based in Sedgwick County. Our work has focused on preventing underage substance use, promoting protective factors, and addressing the role social determinants of health play in the proliferation of substance use disorders (SUDs) and overdoses in our communities. Recently, we wrote a report on evidence-based strategies that could prevent opioid overdoses in the state of Kansas. Between September 2019 to September 2020, synthetic opioid fatalities surged by 55%, and fatalities from other drugs also increased significantly due to laced concentrations of fentanyl, resulting in more than 93,000 deaths and representing the highest number of drug overdose deaths recorded in a 12-month time period. (National Vital Statistics System, 2021). It should be noted that in recent years, opioid overdose deaths have increased at significantly disproportionate rates among Black and Hispanic communities, a reflection of the relation between health inequities, social injustice, and the opioid epidemic (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2021). With respect to the connection between redistricting practices and health outcomes, Latner (2019) found a significant relationship between high partisan bias in legislative redistricting and lower life expectancy, even after controlling for potential confounds. States with the most gerrymandered legislative districts also often had disparately higher rates of infant mortality, opioid overdose deaths, and lack of access to health care among non-Hispanic Black communities (Latner, 2019). High partisan bias in legislative redistricting may exacerbate existing health disparities.

We ask that the Redistricting Committees strive for a trustworthy, accessible, and equitable decision-making process as they set course on a map that will change representation over the next decade. Having the appropriate Census data, and having sufficient time to objectively interpret and make redistricting decisions based upon this data, will be instrumental in ensuring that all Kansans are fairly represented in policymaking. Increasing the time frame of these hearings would serve as best practices for giving Kansans more opportunities to make their voices heard and allow more citizen input in redistricting.

Upholding fairness and nonpartisanship in the legislative redistricting process could be instrumental in addressing substance misuse issues and health disparities.

Ngoc Vuong