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July 20, 2011

BY:

Washington State Redistricting Commission
1063 Capitol Way South, Suite 16
Olympia, WA 98504

Dear Washington State Redistricting Commission:

I am writing to you as a member of the Washington State Redistricting Commission to bring to your attention an important issue. For 40 years, the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) at Rutgers University has been monitoring and analyzing women's status and prospects in American politics, tracking the numbers of women officeholders and conducting research about their impact. In recent years, we have noted a deeply disturbing trend – the stagnation and even decline in the number of elected women – and we want to make sure that trend is not exacerbated by the redistricting process. Yet the early evidence suggests that unless careful attention is paid, women may lose even more ground.

As part of our 2012 Project, a non-partisan campaign to increase the number of women in Congress and state legislatures, we are monitoring the redistricting process nationwide. We have analyzed the new map in New Jersey, the first state to complete its legislative redistricting, and the results are alarming. In a state where 28% of the current legislature is female, women make up at least 57% of the legislators who will retire as a result of redistricting. In other words, women incumbents were disproportionately forced out by redrawn district lines.

We all know that women are more than half the nation's population, and on that basis alone, the paucity of elected women is a problem. Today, women hold 17% of the seats in Congress, 6 governorships out of 50, 24% of seats in state legislatures, and mayor's offices in 8 of the 100 largest cities in the nation. In Washington, women hold 31.3% (46 of 147) of state legislative seats (6th highest in the nation) and 36.4% (4 of 11) of the congressional seats. Although Washington has done better than many states, it still fails to represent women at a level equivalent to their proportions in the population.

But we're not just playing numbers games. Research carried out by scholars at CAWP and elsewhere demonstrates clearly that gender balance changes the way government works, altering the policy agenda, procedures, content and outcomes. On issues as varied as job loss, national security, and health, adding women makes a difference. This is not a partisan divide; both Democratic and Republican women bring distinctive experiences, perspectives and priorities to public office. That's not only good for women; it's good for all of Washington.

Studies cutting across the public and private sectors underscore the value of gender balance. A recent article on Forbes.com cited a Harvard conference that used extensive scholarly research to make "the business case for gender equality." The author reported: "There is irrefutable, verifiable evidence that women in greater than token proportions improve decision-making, improve shareholder value and lower risk-taking." While the business of government does not have shareholders, it certainly does have stakeholders, citizens for whom better decision-making and improved value are critically important.

Under the circumstances, we can ill afford to diminish women's representation in government. That's why I wanted to write to you about this issue. We understand that women are not legally protected in the redistricting rules, but I would ask you to adhere to a higher standard than merely following the basic requirements, which should be seen as a floor, not a ceiling. As you assess the various options before you, don't simply do the least harm; instead, aim to do the most good. I encourage you to ensure that women incumbents – present only through hard-won progress – are treated fairly in the redistricting process.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Debbie Walsh'.

Debbie Walsh
Director, Center for American Women and Politics

cc: Former State Representative Jennifer Belcher, 2012 Project Faculty Member
Former State Representative Velma Veloria, 2012 Project Faculty Member