

Press Release:

**Voting Rights Lawsuit Filed Against
Worcester, Massachusetts**

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BOSTON**

NAACP
WORCESTER
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED PEOPLE



February 8, 2021

BOSTON – A coalition of Black and Hispanic/Latino/a residents of Worcester today filed a federal voting rights lawsuit alleging that the City’s at-large system for electing School Committee members discriminates against communities of color. The plaintiffs also include community organizations Worcester Interfaith and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Worcester Branch.

According to the lawsuit, the use of an at-large system for all seats on the Worcester School Committee dilutes the voting power of minority voters in Worcester, violating the federal Voting Rights Act and the U.S. Constitution.

Worcester is the second largest city in Massachusetts and second largest city in New England. Communities of color in Worcester make up nearly half of the City’s overall population (approximately 44%), with the largest minority populations being Hispanic/Latino/a (21.3%) and Black (12.1%). This represents an increase of 574% and 500%, respectively, of these populations since 1980. The student population of Worcester Public Schools, over which the School Committee presides, is even more diverse. In the 2019-2020 school year, 43.1% of students identified as Hispanic/Latino/a and 16.9% identified as Black or African American. Despite this composition and the rapid growth of the Hispanic/Latino/a and Black communities, Worcester’s six-member School Committee is all-white and with very few exceptions, has been all-white during the course of the City’s history.

“The courts have ruled that at-large systems such as Worcester’s are unfair and illegal. Worcester’s winner-take-all system deprives communities of color of the opportunity to elect candidates of their choice,” said Oren M. Sellstrom of Lawyers for Civil Rights, one of the attorneys representing the plaintiffs.

“The right of representation is fundamental to our democracy. Worcester’s communities of color deserve to have their voices heard, especially as crucial decisions are made by the School Committee directly impacting the children and families of those communities,” said Rebecca MacDowell Lecaroz, partner at Brown Rudnick LLP, who is leading a team of attorneys representing the plaintiffs on a pro bono basis.

The complaint filed today describes the City’s “polarized voting,” whereby the predominantly white voting electorate consistently defeats the candidates preferred by minority communities. The complaint cites the example of the 2019 election, in which the six School Committee candidates (all of whom were white) who received most support in the ten whitest precincts in the City all won election. By contrast, candidates of color who were strongly supported in the ten most diverse precincts in the City were unable to secure enough votes citywide to win office.



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“We have serious disparities in the Worcester Public Schools impacting our students of color who make up 70% of the schools’ population. These disparities are directly linked to policies that fall under the purview of our all-white School Committee, which is not accountable to communities of color. The current all at-large School Committee structure makes it impossible to have fair representation and policies and infrastructure needed for our students to thrive,” said Isabel Gonzalez-Webster, Executive Director of Worcester Interfaith. “We need to change Worcester’s electoral system in order to have true representative democracy and to deliver equal educational opportunity to every Worcester Public School student.”

“We need fair representation in the Worcester Public School System,” agreed Fred Taylor, President of the NAACP, Worcester Branch. “Changing the current election system regarding the School Committee would be a good start.”

Nelly Medina, a Latina resident of Worcester and a plaintiff in the lawsuit, added, “Without appropriate and equitable representation on the School Committee, Worcester’s communities of color will never get anywhere with creating the schools that our children deserve, especially around addressing racial disciplinary disparities.” Medina attended the Worcester Public Schools and she has a child currently attending Worcester Public Schools.

Worcester is the last large city in the Commonwealth to elect its School Committee through an all at-large plurality electoral system. Other cities and towns in the Commonwealth have moved to a system that includes at least some district-based seats. In a district-based system, a city is divided into a number of districts, and residents of each of those districts vote for their own representative on the School Committee (as Worcester currently does for some of its City Council members). In 2019, following two years of litigation, the City of Lowell settled a similar federal lawsuit filed by Lawyers for Civil Rights, ultimately agreeing to change to a district-based electoral system for both the School Committee and City Council.

Elected bodies should reflect the diversity of their communities and this lawsuit seeks to change Worcester’s School Committee election system to a fairer system, to provide opportunity greater diversity and neighborhood representation.

About Brown Rudnick LLP

Brown Rudnick combines ingenuity with experience to achieve great outcomes for our clients. We deliver partner-driven services, incentivize our lawyers to collaborate in the client’s best interest, and put excellence before scale. We have more than 250 lawyers and government relations professionals across the United States and Europe. Last year alone, the Firm represented clients based in more than 90 countries in disputes and transactions.

Brown Rudnick is deeply committed to public service. Pro bono work is an integral part of our culture. Our lawyers, paralegals, and professional staff dedicate their time and talents to help individuals and organizations pursue civil rights and racial justice and in other matters.

About Lawyers for Civil Rights

Lawyers for Civil Rights fosters equal opportunity and fights discrimination on behalf of people of color and immigrants. We engage in creative and courageous legal action, education, and advocacy in collaboration with law firms and community partners. We focus on impact areas that represent the front lines in today’s battle for equality and justice. LCR is headquartered in Boston. We represent clients across Massachusetts and surrounding communities—and the impact of our life-changing work ripples across the country.



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About NAACP Worcester

The mission of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is to secure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights in order to eliminate race-based discrimination and ensure the health and well-being of all persons. Founded in 1909, the NAACP is the nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization. From the ballot box to the classroom, thousands of dedicated members who make up the NAACP continue to fight for social justice for all Americans.

About Worcester Interfaith

Founded in 1993, Worcester Interfaith is a multi-issue, multi-racial broad-based community organization, comprised of 21 dues-paying institutions that reflect the religious, racial, ethnic, and geographic diversity of the City. Worcester Interfaith has built bridges between congregational and community leaders and across religious, socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic boundaries to accomplish much in the areas of jobs, neighborhood improvements, public safety, education and youth, and draw attention to the disproportionate ways in which these issues affect low-income and minority populations.

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