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CONTACT: Pam Wilmot, (617) 962-0034

Voting Rights Advocates Applaud Bill Passed by Senate; Urge Swift Action

This afternoon, the Senate unanimously passed S. 2755, after adopting amendments recommended by voting rights advocates. The bill would make changes necessary to ensure that our fall elections can remain accessible, participatory, and safe during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to ensure that the kind of administration breakdown that happened in Georgia and Wisconsin this spring does not happen in Massachusetts this fall.

Advocates emphasized that election legislation must be completed and signed by the Governor without delay to give election officials time to implement it before the Sept. 1 primary election and Nov. 3 general election.

“By mailing all registered voters mail ballot applications, creating a secure and accessible online portal for requesting and tracking ballots, and expanding early voting options, this bill will provide Massachusetts voters straightforward and effective options for casting a ballot safely during a pandemic,” Pam Wilmot, Executive Director of Common Cause Massachusetts said. “We applaud the Legislature for moving quickly to address the serious challenges that this pandemic poses to our elections.”

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in March, the Election Modernization Coalition has been working with legislators to craft and move legislation that would address the needs of voters and elections officials alike.

“We understood immediately that Massachusetts was not prepared to conduct elections in the face of a pandemic. The changes that are required – and that are included in this bill – are significant. They will enable elections officials to transition to a largely vote by mail system, and as a coalition, we salute elections officials and legislators for making these changes to get our elections administration up to speed quickly,” said Pattye Comfort, Executive Director of the League of Women Voters of Massachusetts.

S. 2755 was passed with 14 amendments, three of which were priorities of the Election Modernization Coalition and supported by nearly 80 other Massachusetts organizations. Those amendments would:

- Ensure that the Secretary of the Commonwealth creates an effective online portal for requesting ballots,
- Help ensure that completed ballots sent on or before election day in November are counted, and
- Extend the deadline for requesting absentee ballots.

The Coalition also celebrates the adoption of an amendment that would prevent the location or number of polling places from being changed if doing so would have a disparate impact on voters based on race, income, disability, age, or national origin.

House and Senate leaders must now decide how to reconcile the House and Senate versions of the bill. The final bill must be approved by the Senate and House before it goes to Governor Baker for his signature.

"The clock is ticking," said Cheryl Clyburn Crawford, Executive Director of MassVOTE. "We applaud the Senate for taking a number of steps to bolster this vote by mail legislation, and urge the House to swiftly adopt these changes. There's no time to lose, for the September primary is less than 80 days away."

"Voting rights are central to racial justice," said Rahsaan Hall, Racial Justice Program Director at the ACLU of Massachusetts. "We need to ensure that the final version of this legislation is adopted swiftly, and that it expressly protects against disparities based on race, national origin, income, age, and disability."

"The final bill should include the amendments that were adopted to make sure that ballot access this fall is both smooth and equitable," said Sophia Hall, Supervising Attorney at Lawyers for Civil Rights. "In this election, more than ever, we need to protect the right to vote for people of color and other historically disenfranchised groups."

"The coalition will work together to ensure quick passage of this bill," said Janet Domenitz, Executive Director of MASSPIRG. "We hope that the Governor will make quick work of signing it into law, as the Commonwealth needs these changes immediately."

Contacts:

Pam Wilmot, Common Cause Massachusetts
(617) 962-0034

Cheryl Clyburn Crawford, Executive Director, MassVOTE
(617) 542-8683 x211

Rahsaan Hall, Racial Justice Program, ACLU of Massachusetts

(781) 910-5215

Janet Domenitz, Executive Director, MASSPIRG

(617) 292-4800

Beth Huang, Executive Director, Massachusetts Voter Table

(414) 378-5889

Patricia Comfort, Executive Director, League of Women Voters of Massachusetts

(857) 452-1712

Sophia Hall Esq., Lawyers for Civil Rights (216) 323-0093

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The Election Modernization Coalition is comprised of the ACLU of Massachusetts, Common Cause Massachusetts, Lawyers for Civil Rights, the League of Women Voters of Massachusetts, MASSPIRG, MassVOTE, and the Massachusetts Voter Table.