

COMMON CAUSE PENNSYLVANIA TESTIMONY

Senate State Government Committee

April 30, 2020

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony here today. We appreciate the bipartisan spirit in which the General Assembly has approached how best to ensure that every eligible voter can vote in the upcoming primary and general elections. While Common Cause Pennsylvania recognizes that we are currently facing unprecedented challenges to our public health and safety and our economy, it is critical that our democracy is upheld, even, or especially, during times of crisis.

Common Cause Pennsylvania is a nonpartisan good government organization dedicated to holding power accountable to the people. On behalf of our 44,000 members across Pennsylvania, we encourage our election officials and lawmakers to consider adopting measures to not only protect the public health of every Pennsylvanian, but also their right to vote in the upcoming Primary and General Elections.

We understand that election administration is a highly technical field where competing priorities often bump up against a general need for additional resources. We want to share our sincere respect and admiration for the professionals who do this incredibly difficult task. Thank you to all the county election officials, and especially to the intrepid and dedicated staff at the Department of State under the leadership of Secretary Boockvar.

Regardless of the challenges inherent to holding an election in the midst of a pandemic and implementing historic voting reforms all at the same time, it is essential point that every eligible voter must be able to cast a ballot, regardless of zip code, proximity to public transportation, disability, or language access needs.

Expanding Vote-By-Mail

For the first time in this upcoming election, all Pennsylvania voters will have the option to vote by mail. This new option has proved to be an incredible resource to hundreds of thousands of Pennsylvanians during this uncertain time. While we applaud the General Assembly for making this change, further improvements can be made to ensure that all voters who want to can access vote-by-mail. Specifically, we recommend the following:

- Extending vote-by-mail deadlines. Currently, a voter's **ballot must be submitted to the county** by 8:00p.m. on election night. While this is an improvement from the previous absentee ballot deadline, this still does not go far enough to ensure each mail ballot is counted. The timing of **each county's mail service** is not created equal. Asking voters to anticipate when their ballot **will arrive at their county's election office is unrealistic. Pennsylvania should expand the** deadline and allow ballots to be counted 7 days after Election Day. This will allow for more voter participation and will relieve counties of having to count several thousand ballots at one time.
- Prepaying postage for both the application and the ballot. Voters should have equal access to vote by mail, regardless of whether they have a book of stamps laying around. As paying bills and communication has moved increasingly online, many people no longer regularly buy and use stamps. Additionally, given the current stay at home orders/recommendations, it may be more difficult for people to procure stamps, even assuming they have the financial means to do so. While we commend the counties that are voluntarily paying for postage for applications and/or ballots, not all counties have the resources available to do that. To create equal footing for all voters and increase access, the General Assembly should provide funds to prepay postage for both the application and the absentee or mail-in-ballot.
- Voters who require language assistance must have full access to all the information and assistance provided to English-only speakers. The Department of State and county elections officials must provide translations of all critical information including at a minimum: incorporating English and Spanish into all of the new voting options made possible by Acts 12 and 77, and into new voting systems recently procured by counties; translating mail-in ballot applications, ballots, and other associated materials, and incorporating language access into the broad spectrum of voter education efforts. The General Assembly should appropriate additional funding to ensure that DOS has the resources to do this work quickly.
- The General Assembly should appropriate funds for and require that each and every registered Pennsylvania voter, who has not already signed up, be mailed a vote-by-mail application. This would ensure that every registered voter would have the opportunity to sign up and participate in their election, without having the burden placed on them to find the application. .
- We also recommend increasing the amount of time each county has to canvas vote-by-mail and absentee ballots. Currently, the county can only start canvassing these ballots at 7:00a.m. on election day. This means each county has to count several thousand ballots in one sitting. Increasing the canvassing time will allow for counties to spread out the counting of ballots and decrease the number of workers or machines need to count these ballots.

Reduction of Polling Places

Although we understand the challenges many county election officials have in retaining poll workers and poll sites, consolidating polling places must be done with care to avoid disenfranchising voters. Specifically, consolidation could make it more difficult for voters to cast a ballot, especially for lower income voters, people with disabilities, and those who lack reliable access to transportation. Our elections must be administered so that every voter can cast a ballot, regardless of their personal circumstances.

We urge the General Assembly and DOS to further specify what factors must be considered when consolidating polling locations and clarify and expand the requirements for counties to communicate with affected voters.

- Counties should be required to only select polling places that are easily accessible via multiple modes of transportation and for voters with disabilities or other limitations that make it difficult to travel long distances. Where possible, counties should be encouraged to request public input into the consolidation process.
- Counties must zealously educate voters about any polling place changes and any new voting procedures, including providing voter education materials in multiple languages, posting signage on Primary Election day, mailing updated voter registration ID cards, and multi-layered communication (US Mail, phone, email, and text) to each affected voter.

Protection of Poll Workers

Poll workers are on the front lines of elections. Ensuring that they are protected must be a priority. While we appreciate that DOS will be providing 6000 PPE kits during the primary, the General Assembly should appropriate additional funds to assist counties and DOS in procuring PPE prior to June 2.

Additional Elections Funding

We all know that elections are the cornerstone of our democracy. It is essential that we provide our counties and Department of State with sufficient funds to effectively administer elections, particularly in these uncertain and chaotic times. Additional funds from the General Assembly would help election directors purchase new technology such as high speed scanners, to handle the influx of vote by mail ballots, increase their staff, provide poll workers with increased pay, including pay for training on new voting machines, supplement the purchase of PPE for poll workers and polling places, and more. This General Assembly should provide additional funds for counties and the Department of State to carry out their mission.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony today.

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