2016 Senate State Government Committee
Information Meeting
April 6, 2016

Remarks of Secretary Pedro A. Cortés
Pennsylvania Department of State

Chairman Folmer, Chairman Williams and members of the State Senate Government Committee:

Good morning. Thank you for the invitation to appear before the Committee to discuss recent steps by the Department of State to better serve the citizens of our great Commonwealth.

It is a pleasure to be with you to talk about the Department of State's recent initiatives. The Department's vision is to be the premier Department of State agency in the nation by consistently providing the highest level of accurate, courteous and timely service.

We do this while always keeping in mind that Pennsylvanians rightly seek assurance that as government officials we are making the best use of taxpayer money, are continually seeking out greater efficiencies and are conducting our operations ethically. I can assure you that the entire Department of State staff works hard every day to implement and carry out business practices that foster innovation and increase productivity.

Office for New Pennsylvanians

In the last 60 years Pennsylvania's population has grown just over 2 million people. In the same period, California has seen a population increase of almost 27 million, Florida 16 million and Texas 17 million. This growth disparity has cost Pennsylvania 12 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives and has had other negative effects. The Department of State wants to do its part to address this disturbing trend.

One way to promote population growth in Pennsylvania is to make our state more attractive to potential newcomers from other states and abroad. The Office for New Pennsylvanians (ONP) can be such a vehicle.

The goal of ONP is to attract, retain and successfully integrate new Pennsylvanians into the Commonwealth. Target groups for ONP are former Pennsylvanians who moved to other states, professional licensees in other jurisdictions, out-of-state and foreign students attending colleges and universities in Pennsylvania, and entrepreneurs, among others.

To achieve its goal, ONP would create a central clearinghouse where new Pennsylvanians can receive information about services that can facilitate their transition and integration to the state. ONP would refer new Pennsylvanians to the appropriate service providers based on the unique needs of the individual.

Other states such as Massachusetts, Michigan, and New York already have offices similar to the proposed ONP. In the case of Michigan, $1.8 billion of the state's recent economic growth was attributed to new business owners.

ONP will generate positive economic benefits. By attracting and retaining new residents, we can stimulate the economy and address Pennsylvania's stagnant population. By easing the transition to residency in Pennsylvania, we help make new residents productive, taxpaying members of the workforce more quickly.

OVR and Signature Upload Enhancement

The Department, through its Bureau of Commissions, Election and Legislation (BCEL), is continually striving to bring about the highest levels of efficiency, integrity and uniformity in the elections process.

This year, we are working to support the counties as they deal with the increased activity that accompanies each presidential election year. County election officials have confirmed our expectation that the new online voter registration (OVR) system improves accuracy, reduces time-consuming data entry and yields cost savings.

As of midnight on March 28, the last day to register for the April primary, over 358,000 Pennsylvanians had used the OVR application to register for the first time or to update their voter information.

A new feature to the OVR system now allows applicants to upload their signature electronically if necessary. With this feature, Pennsylvania becomes the latest state that allows all eligible voters to submit a completely electronic online voter registration application.

The OVR site, launched in August 2015, can link to electronic signatures on file with the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT). Previously, applicants with no driver's license or PennDOT ID, or whose information could not be verified with PennDOT, were offered two options. They could print the completed application, sign it and mail it to their county election office. Or they could choose to have a signature form mailed to them to complete and mail.

Now there is a third option. The signature upload feature is available only to applicants whose signature cannot be linked from PennDOT. An individual can easily upload their signature via a desktop computer or mobile device. To ensure security, the Department is using Kofax, the same technology employed by financial institutions for online banking transactions that require digital signatures.

Electronic Registration Information Center

In another move to increase the efficiency of our elections process, Pennsylvania joined the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC), a multistate record-matching consortium.

Pennsylvania is one of 16 ERIC members. The other members are Alabama, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, Minnesota, Nevada, Oregon, Rhode Island, Utah, Virginia, Washington, and the District of Columbia.

ERIC harnesses the latest technology to securely compare key state data to better inform election officials about voters on their list whose information might be out-of-date. With more accurate voter rolls, ERIC helps member jurisdictions save money and run more efficient elections as there will be less returned mail, fewer provisional ballots on Election Day and shorter lines at polling places.

In conclusion, with your support and the talent, hard work and dedication of the Department's employees, we have become one of the premier Department of State agencies in the nation. We trust that you, the Senate, will continue to support the Department to fully meet its responsibilities and achieve its potential.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today.