

**COVID-19, the Pennsylvania Primary Election and the focus on Philadelphia**  
**Remarks by Commissioner Deeley, Chairwoman, Philadelphia Board of Elections**

Philadelphia is doing all that we can to prepare for a June 2<sup>nd</sup> Election Day, while being faced with a multitude of difficult and challenging realities. A lot of the time we are faced with decisions where there is no good option, and the best option is often times just the least bad.

Previously, I joined with elected officials from other southeastern counties and asked for Primary Day to be delayed to June 23<sup>rd</sup>, which certainly would have allowed us the most time to prepare. Although the date of June 23<sup>rd</sup> was not what was settled on, let me take this opportunity to thank you for the delay to June 2<sup>nd</sup> date. The election would not have been able to go on April 28<sup>th</sup> and the additional time has given us the ability to put together a comprehensive plan to hold an in-person election and to communicate to voters their ability to vote safely from their homes.

In recent weeks, my fellow Commissioners and I have been working in tandem with the Pennsylvania Department of State, Governor Tom Wolf, and following public health procedures to the best of our ability. COVID-19 caused the cancellation of all our Election Board training classes, an unprecedented move that was done out of the safety of our Election Board workers, our training host sites, and our staff. We are receiving calls and emails from Election Board workers and polling places saying that they are not available for the June 2<sup>nd</sup> Primary. The passage of ACT 12 allows for the consolidation of polling sites. We are currently working on our Election Day plan with these consolidated polling places. This election, a greater percentage of Philadelphia voters will cast their votes through the mail than ever before. These ballots will be counted after Election Day, it is likely that it will be a few days before the close races are able to be called. Even without a pandemic, we do not have the available staff to begin counting the absentee and mail-in ballots on Election Day.

Recently, a huge effort to highlight the option of mail-in ballots has been undertaken. The Department of State mailed every Democrat and Republican voter a postcard with the URL to the online application and they are beginning a media and social media campaign. In Philadelphia, the Commissioners are on the radio asking voters to apply. All the department's social media accounts are urging Philadelphia voters to apply for a mail-in ballot on a daily basis. We are looking into email and texting options in order to drive voters to the online form and are also exploring providing information and paper applications with the city's food distribution program. I recently passed a motion that the Board of Elections will prepay the return postage of the ballots so that voters do not have to leave their homes to buy a stamp. We have seen a significant uptick in applications, more so than we ever would have imagined. Staff of the Philadelphia Board of Elections are being reassigned and a greater number of staff are being brought back to work to process the increased number of absentee and mail-in ballot applications. As of today, Philadelphia has received over 70,000 applications. For comparison purposes, the Board received 16,101 applications for the 2012 General, 15,887 for the 2016 General, and 5,742 for the 2016 Primary.

While the large number of applications are important, they are misleading. The poor and working-class neighborhoods of the city are not keeping pace with the more affluent parts. More steps must be done to advocate voters to vote by mail. Governor Tom Wolf holds press

conferences daily, and one of his pieces of information to Pennsylvanians' should be to apply for a mail-in ballot from their local county election office. Additionally, thousands of Pennsylvania citizens are utilizing online services to apply for unemployment claims, as well as other services such as ordering alcohol from the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board. Information should be displayed on these websites so these thousands of citizens are aware that they can – and should – vote by mail for this election. Applications and information should be put in the bags of wine and spirits that citizens are buying through curbside pickup.

Just last week, I called on the Governor and the State Legislature to act and extend the deadline to return voted ballots to the Board of Elections. Currently, voted ballots must be received by the Board of Election by 8pm on Election Day, June 2<sup>nd</sup>. I asked that, due to the unprecedented circumstances of the COVID-19 Pandemic and the resulting increase in the number of applications from voters requesting to vote from home, the deadline for County Boards of Elections to receive voted ballots be extended to June 9<sup>th</sup> and that all voted ballots received by that date and postmarked by June 2<sup>nd</sup> be accepted. June 9<sup>th</sup> is the current deadline for military and overseas absentee ballots and the postmark requirement is the same as what the courts granted to the voters of Wisconsin.

The state should act well ahead of the lawsuits that were seen in Wisconsin and Ohio, which confused voters with ever-changing information and are already starting to be filed here. The Courts have been clear, they would prefer Governors and Legislatures act to prevent these matters from coming before them, this is a bipartisan issue. Both the Democratic and Republican parties have been encouraging their voters to apply for the new, no-excuse mail-in ballots. Our staff and elections' staffs all around the state are working hard every day to process the mountain of applications we are receiving. But, the rules were not designed to handle ten times the number of applications that we typically see in a presidential general election. I'm calling on you to do the responsible thing and update the rules for this Primary to reflect the new reality. We do not want to be Wisconsin and we do not want the courts to have to step in.

Finally, I would like to address the financial crisis that the Philadelphia City Commissioners' Office is facing. The implementation of, the Governor's voting machine replacement mandate, Act 77, and now Act 12, requires funding. This funding to implement these monumental changes and meet lawmakers and voters' expectations - even prior to this pandemic – was in desperate need. For example, our new voting system has a voter verifiable paper ballot, we must now spend about \$95,000 on paper ballots per citywide election. This comes out to \$190,000 a year in new expenses on just the ballots. We just received notice that we will be receiving 878,000 in a federal Election Security grant that we could use towards Act 77 expenses. That amount does not even cover one year's base salaries of all the new clerks we have to hire to enter the voter registration forms in time to make the supplemental poll books. To this day, the Philadelphia City Commissioners have yet to receive any state grants, from the Commonwealth, to implement Act 77 or to communicate the changes to the voters, despite repeated promises. Before the COVID-19 crisis, the City of Philadelphia stepped in, seeing that the changes brought upon by Act 77 needed to be adequately addressed and increased our budget by \$10 million. Since the financial impacts of COVID-19, the administration has since rescinded that funding. Our ability to run an election under the new reality of Act 77 is in jeopardy.

To recap, we are faced with enforcing some of the greatest changes to voting in the Commonwealth in decades, yet the Commonwealth has given ZERO funding to do so, right in the middle of a pandemic.

In closing, I want to thank the staff of the Philadelphia City Commissioners Office, who have been nothing but dedicated and committed to the cause. I would also like to thank election staff workers throughout the Commonwealth who have been dealing with a crisis while performing their duties, often in an ever-changing environment. This is all being done to ensure Pennsylvanian's have their right to a free, fair election and can have their voices heard on June 2<sup>nd</sup>.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide this testimony.