

COMMON CAUSE PENNSYLVANIA TESTIMONY

Senate State Government Committee

July 23, 2020

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony here today.

Common Cause Pennsylvania recognizes that we are currently facing unprecedented challenges to our public health and safety. However, it is critical that our democracy is upheld, even, or especially, during times of crisis and it is apparent we will still be facing COVID-19 challenges this November. While we will provide detailed recommendations below, our primary concern is that these matters are resolved quickly so that voters, advocates, and most, importantly county elections officials can effectively plan for our November election.

Common Cause Pennsylvania is a nonpartisan good government organization dedicated to holding power accountable to the people. On behalf of our 36,000 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 General Election.

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

The participation in vote-by-mail in June's Primary Election demonstrates that this will continue to be not only a popular, but inherently safe option for Pennsylvanians casting their vote this November. This new option has proved to be an incredible resource to over 1.5 million of voters during this uncertain time. While we applaud the counties, and the Department of State for the implementation of this process, it is apparent further improvements must 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 that are postmarked by Election Day to be counted up to 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.
- 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 ballot. This would ensure that every registered voter would have the opportunity to safely participate in their election, without having the burden placed on them to find the ballot.
- 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. 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

While we fervently hope that we will not need to significantly reduce the number of polling places in November, it is becoming more apparent as COVID-19 surges continue to rise, that we must plan for the contingency that all existing polling locations will not open as usual this November. Because counties are required to offer in-person polling locations for voters who are unable to vote by mail, who did not receive a ballot, or who require assistive technology or language assistance to vote, counties need flexibility under the law to plan for various scenarios. Additionally, when polling place consolidation occurs, there must be a limit on the number of voters these consolidated polling locations serve to ensure public health and safety. Poll workers should be permitted to be assigned anywhere in the county --- not just their home precincts

We urge the General Assembly and DOS to further specify what factors must be considered when consolidating polling locations this November 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. We are hopeful that DOS will provide PPE kits as they did during the primary. However, the General Assembly should appropriate additional funds to assist counties and DOS in procuring PPE prior to November 3rd.

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, especially now. 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.

