



**Testimony of Seth Bluestein  
City Commissioner of Philadelphia**

**Pennsylvania Senate State Government Committee  
Tuesday, April 5, 2022**

Good afternoon Chairman Argall, Minority Chair Street, and honorable members of the State Government Committee. My name is Seth Bluestein, and I'm one of the City Commissioners for Philadelphia. I have served in election management for the past decade, working as a Deputy Commissioner for former City Commissioner Al Schmidt. I would like to thank you for inviting me to testify on the important election management issues under consideration in Senate Bill 982 and House Bill 2044. The adequate financing of election management has become an increasingly complicated matter in recent years, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to work with your committee on this subject.

As with some other aspects of local governance, election operation and voter registration management entails the implementation of federal, state, and local laws and regulations by county officials. We receive financing primarily through local appropriations as well as via federal and state grants and reimbursements. Unfortunately, as with other local government agencies, these financing sources sometimes prove insufficient. If these funding sources dry up, it is our responsibility to continue to operate elections as best as we're able.

In late 2019, the legislature passed Act 77 which introduced no-excuse mail-in voting to Pennsylvania for the first time. Act 77 did not include any funding for the production, processing, mailing, or tabulating of these mail-in ballots and therefore represented a significant unfunded mandate imposed by the state on the counties. Processing mail-in ballot applications requires substantial staffing and technological resources; printing the ballots costs money; mailing the ballots costs postage; receiving, organizing, and maintaining the ballots requires significant staffing and spacing allocations; and reviewing, opening, and tabulating the ballots involves large expenditures of staffing and spacing resources – particularly given the restriction on pre-canvassing. Our department needed large-scale investments to accommodate these processes, but these funds were not immediately available to us from our governmental appropriators.

As the Committee knows, Philadelphia received a grant from the Center for Tech and Civic Life (CTCL) in 2020. This money was spent on a variety of immediate and long-term investments in the department's ability to hold elections. Approximately half the funds were expended on capital investments related to mail-in ballot processing equipment – an industrial printer, industrial folders, envelope inserters, envelope sorters, envelope extractors, and high-speed ballot tabulators. These technological enhancements will enable the department to more affordably produce, maintain, and count mail-in ballots for years to come as we continue implementing the unfunded mandate of Act 77. We also utilized these funds for additional Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), increased election board worker

pay to encourage adequate staffing of polling places, and hiring hundreds of temporary workers who were engaged in the ballot production and tabulation process. Much of these costs were necessitated by the prohibition on mail-in ballot pre-canvassing and the public's desire for election results to be immediately available, reliable, and complete.

Philadelphia's use of the CTCL grant financed the necessary operations of the department when no government appropriating authority stepped up. In addition to reliable and consistent funding to the counties, another way the legislature could help would be to expand the pre-canvass period allowing for a more efficient and cost-effective process for opening and counting ballots. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to discuss these critical election issues with you. I look forward to continuing this dialogue in the future so we can work together to improve our election processes.