

# Time is running out for election reform before November



BY RAY MURPHY

Time is running out for the General Assembly and administration to ensure that all eligible voters can exercise their right to vote in November without risking their health and safety.

The June primary exposed several unique challenges facing the state as it prepares for another election during this pandemic, and the only people with the power to fix a looming disaster this general election are our lawmakers and the

governor — together.

Gov. Tom Wolf recently signed into law a bill that requires the state to produce a report on the primary election and identify what changes need to happen before November. But that report isn't even due until August, and lawmakers aren't due back in session until September.

That's too late.

We don't know what the coming months may bring, but we can be fairly certain that existing polling locations won't operate as usual in November. The same challenges that existed in the spring still exist today.

The backbone of our election process is volunteer poll workers, many of whom are considered at risk because of their age. (The vast majority are over 60

years old.)

These poll workers are legitimately concerned about placing their health at risk by sitting in a small space for half a day, interacting with hundreds or thousands of voters, where social distancing may be impossible.

We saw the problem play out during the primary. If counties faced a massive poll worker shortage when turnout was only 35 percent statewide, then there is simply no way we will have enough poll workers to serve the higher turnout of a presidential election.

When the pandemic hit, lawmakers acted quickly to adopt temporary measures to ensure residents' health and safety while protecting the integrity of our elections during the primary. That

included new provisions for polling place consolidation.

The same urgency is needed today.

Although considerable attention has been focused on mail-in ballots, and rightly so — in the primary, nearly 1.5 million voters cast ballots using the mail-in or absentee voting options, or 51 percent of all votes cast — nearly just as many voters voted in person, and many plan to do the same in November.

Counties need the flexibility to consolidate polling places now, so they can find the best alternative locations and set realistic goals for poll worker recruitment. To ensure public health and safety, limits are needed on the number of precincts that can be consolidated as well as the number of voters

each new polling location serves to prevent long lines and allow for social distancing.

And, because of staffing challenges, poll workers who want to volunteer should be permitted to be assigned anywhere in the county — not just their home precincts.

There is no reason to wait on these commonsense provisions.

Because of the pandemic, more voters may choose to vote by mail in November. The process is proven, efficient and secure. And amid the COVID-19 crisis, it may be among the safest option for individuals like seniors or others with underlying health concerns.

But even voting by mail isn't without its challenges.

The unexpectedly high volume of mail-in ballots and disruptions caused by the coronavirus meant many ballots never made it to the voter or didn't make it back to county election offices in time to count. And when they could be count-

ed, in some counties the count lasted for days, delaying results.

Counties must be permitted to pre-canvass mail-in ballots well before Election Day, instead of waiting until 7 a.m. on Election Day according to existing law.

Pre-canvassing isn't vote counting. Pre-canvassing simply allows counties to open envelopes, flatten and stack the ballots, and then lock them up securely, so results can be determined more quickly once tabulation begins on Election Day.

These changes cannot wait. Elected officials need to act now so election officials have enough time to implement the changes before November and voters have confidence in the process.

Our democracy depends on citizens safely and securely exercising their right to vote.

*Ray Murphy is the state coordinator for Keystone Votes.*