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House Election Reform Measures Good First Step but Miss Opportunity to Address In-Person Voting Challenges

HARRISBURG (June 24, 2020) – Although encouraged that the House State Government Committee acted on several election reform measures instead of pushing off all deliberations until the fall, when it could be too late to implement fixes before the general election, the nonpartisan Keystone Votes coalition today said it is still disappointed that none of the bills addressed issues related to in-person voting.

The primary was the first election with new voting machines and a new vote-by-mail option, so there were bound to be some challenges --- and that's before a global pandemic hit and civil rights protests erupted everywhere. State and county officials and election workers faced monumental challenges and did the best they could.

But Pennsylvania's primary election still exposed several critical issues related to in-person pandemic-related voting. Polling place consolidation led to long lines and confusion among voters who were trying to find or access their location. Some poll workers refused to wear personal protective equipment, and social distancing at times was ineffective, ignored, or impossible to implement in cramped settings. At least one Philadelphian potentially may have contracted COVID-19 while working at the polls, [according to reports](#).

"The people who normally work at polling locations across the state are already starting to call off for the November general election for fear of the virus, and it's only June," said Ray Murphy, state coordinator for Keystone Votes, which comprises 43 civil rights, civil liberties, and good government groups, as well as large civic engagement organizations with members in all 67 counties. "It's entirely unlikely that all existing polling locations will open as usual in November.

"Why isn't the state legislature allowing boards of election to get started right away to figure out alternatives? Voters have the right to cast a ballot in person, and counties need time to figure out how to deliver a safe experience, in easily accessible, large spaces," he said.

Although the House measures address several critical challenges, such as allowing counties to start counting mail-in ballots earlier than election day and allowing voters to return mail-in ballots to their polling place, the package is entirely absent of in-person reforms.

“The most important and urgent thing the legislature can do is give counties the ability to fix the problems we saw with in-person voting,” Murphy said. “As much as it’s a positive sign that lawmakers are taking up some of these reforms now, any legislative package that fails to address in-person voting challenges is a missed opportunity.”

Among some of Keystone Votes’ priorities to address in-person voting issues:

- Limit polling consolidation to 5,000 voters and require large sites that allow for social distancing and that are easily accessible to all voters by foot or public transit and that have ample parking, issues that surfaced during the primary.
- Give counties flexibility in setting up in-person polling locations by allowing workers to be assigned anywhere in the county, not just their home precincts, and allow counties to set up vote centers where any voter in the county could cast a ballot.
- Authorize the Department of State and/or county boards of elections to send mail-in ballots to all registered voters, which won’t privilege one political party over another. It would cost approximately \$15 million to have mail-in ballots sent to all registered voters, and printing and pre-paid postage costs covered.
- Invest to protect voters and workers and preserve the integrity of elections by allocating \$2.4 million for proper person protective equipment, and help counties get the staff and equipment they need to speed up ballot counting.

Keystone Votes has been working for years with lawmakers on election reforms, including these measures and others, to ensure a safe, secure and fair election in November.

But time is of the essence. Although 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 in November, that report isn’t even due until August, which is too late to give election directors the time they need to implement any changes effectively.

The coalition is urging lawmakers to continue its legislative session through the summer.

A full copy of the coalition’s legislative agenda can be found at www.KeystoneVotes.org.

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Keystone Votes, a nonpartisan coalition comprising 43 advocacy and community organizations working to update Pennsylvania’s election system, has been urging the state to start working now on reforms that would modernize the state’s election system, help counties buy modern machines, and update technology to enhance security and accessibility before the 2020 elections. More at www.keystonevotes.org.