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With Pa. Primary Set to Move, Focus Now Shifts to Ensuring Changes Don't Disenfranchise Voters

HARRISBURG (March 25, 2020) – Keystone Votes, a nonpartisan coalition comprising 43 civil rights, civil liberties, and good government groups, as well as large civic engagement organizations with members in all 67 counties, today applauded the bipartisan efforts of Gov. Tom Wolf and the General Assembly to act swiftly in a time of crisis to delay Pennsylvania's Primary Election and address some technical glitches in state's sweeping voting reform law.

But now the focus must shift to election protection, as more eligible voters are expected to use mail-in ballots for the first time, with several administration policies related to the process still in flux, and new provisions authorizing county election officials to close and consolidate polling places inadvertently could disenfranchise voters, especially older residents, people with disabilities, and those who lack access to reliable transportation.

"Gov. Tom Wolf, his administration, and the entire General Assembly have displayed great leadership and demonstrated their commitment to all Pennsylvanians during these trying times," said Suzanne Almeida, Interim Director of Common Cause Pennsylvania. "In the face of this growing pandemic, our state elected officials put aside partisanship to do what was in the best interest of the health and safety of residents, while doing their best to protecting democracy and the integrity of elections."

The House approved an amended measure (S.B. 422) on Wednesday that moved the primary from April 28 to June 2, while simultaneously allowing elections officials to begin processing mail-in and absentee ballots earlier, instead of waiting until 8 p.m. on Election Day, as currently required. The Senate concurred in the House amendments later that same evening and sent the legislation to the governor, who is expected to sign it.

"No one underestimates the immense challenges our elected leaders faced in trying to balance public health and the sacred right to vote," said Ray Murphy, state coordinator for Keystone

Votes. “But now the devil is in the details. The focus now needs to shift to implementation and ensuring with all these changes, no eligible voters are disenfranchised.”

Even before passage of S.B. 422, Keystone Votes had been working with the Pennsylvania Department of State, legislators, election officials, and other key stakeholders to fix technical and administrative flaws within Act 77 of 2019 and address the challenges of pulling off an election during a pandemic. Recent changes make that work even more urgent, given expected polling place closures and consolidations and the potential for a high number of mail-in ballots.

“That means guaranteeing accessible ballots for people with disabilities; providing a means for voters to replace ballots that are lost in the mail due to address changes, if they are displaced because of the pandemic; and finally establishing clear criteria for when a mail-in ballot voter’s application may be rejected to protect against suppression,” said Ivan Garcia, Civic Engagement Director for Make the Road PA. “It is up to the Department of State to address these issues to ensure a smooth transition.”

To view Keystone Votes’ election reform recommendations, visit: www.KeystoneVotes.org (click “Newsroom” and scroll to “Correspondence”).

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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.