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Pa. Should Strengthen Vote-by-Mail Process

HARRISBURG (March 18, 2021) – Keystone Votes is urging lawmakers to continue their work to preserve and strengthen elements of Act 77 of 2019, the bipartisan measure that made some of the most significant updates to Pennsylvania election laws in 80 years, including creation of a new no-excuse vote-by-mail process.

The [House State Government Committee held its fifth in a series of hearings today](#) to review the 2020 elections, focusing on mail-in and absentee ballots procedures. The 2020 primary and general elections were the first time no-excuse mail-in ballots were used in Pennsylvania. Because of public health concerns, more than 2.6 million voters embraced the new law and submitted mail-in ballots in the November General Election.

“Last year was a monumental moment for Pennsylvania, with the state implementing an entirely new voting system amid record turnout during a global pandemic,” **said Ray Murphy, state coordinator for Keystone Votes.** “Legislators should be proud of the early reforms they enacted. They made a big difference in how our elections were managed. Of course, the rollout of any new idea comes with growing pains, so there are things the administration and General Assembly need to do to improve the vote-by-mail system.”

Keystone Votes, a nonpartisan coalition comprising 42 civil rights, civil liberties and good government groups working in all 67 counties to modernize Pennsylvania’s election system, has a comprehensive election reform agenda that includes improving the vote-by-mail process.

Among the reforms, the state needs to **change the pre-canvassing process** --- a concept that both Republicans and Democrats support --- so that counties can begin to process and prepare ballots for tabulation prior to Election Day.

The most important reason to make this change is so counties can **establish clear guidelines and a better voter notification process** so small, honest mistakes --- i.e., someone simply forgot to sign a mail-in ballot --- can be fixed before the ballot return deadline. This will allow every eligible voter to be confident that his or her vote will be counted. Establishing a uniform notification process will help to strengthen election integrity and enhance public trust.

“Voters across the political spectrum support transparent ballot notification processes that allow voters to fix small, honest mistakes so that their votes can be counted,” **said Kay Cook, Regional Director at Secure Democracy.** “Pennsylvania has an opportunity to restore public trust in our elections and strengthen election integrity by establishing a uniform notification process.”

Pre-canvassing also will ease the burden on county election officials, allowing thousands of ballots to be prepared for tabulation over many days, rather than the same day that they must also open polling places all across the county.

Pre-canvassing is not vote counting. It simply allows counties to open envelopes, verify signatures, flatten and stack ballots, and then lock them up securely so results can be determined more quickly once tabulation begins on Election Day. The practice is fairly common. Among states that allow mail-in voting, more than two dozen already allow election officials to begin the process of preparing the ballots for tabulation before Election Day.

“Addressing ballot issues is essential to our democracy to prevent mass disenfranchisement,” **said Michelle Kim, Civic Engagement Coordinator at SEAMAAC.** “Rejected mail-in ballots disproportionately affect marginalized communities, particularly immigrant and refugee communities who already face an additional language barrier around the new process of vote-by-mail. Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders had record voter turnout in the 2020 election largely due to the expanded access to vote by mail, and it is vital we continue to ensure they have a voice in our democracy.”

Keystone votes also wants **mail-in ballots to be counted if they are postmarked by Election Day** but arrive at the county election office after Election Day. **Vote centers** also would relieve county pressure on poll worker recruitment and give voters the chance to cast a ballot whether they are by their home, job, school or anywhere that is convenient.

For Keystone Votes’ full legislative agenda, please visit www.KeystoneVotes.org.

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Keystone Votes, a nonpartisan coalition comprising 42 advocacy and community organizations across the state, has been urging the commonwealth to implement reforms that would modernize the state’s election system and update technology to enhance security and accessibility. More at www.keystonevotes.org.