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Administering June 2 Primary Brings Challenges, But Voters Can Be Sure of Safe, Secure Elections

HARRISBURG (April 30, 2020) – Pennsylvania faces several unique challenges in administering its Primary Election on June 2 because of the pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus.

“County election offices have an obligation to ensure a free and fair election despite the unprecedented obstacles posed by the pandemic,” said Ray Murphy, state coordinator for Keystone Votes. “The primary will be an important test. And it’s one we can’t fail, because the sanctity of our democracy is at stake.”

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, has been working for years to update Pennsylvania’s election laws to make voting more convenient, secure and equally accessible for all who are eligible.

In [testimony](#) submitted to the Senate State Government Committee, which held a hearing on Thursday, April 30, the coalition outlined several key policy issues need to be addressed or considered not only in advance of the Primary Election but for the General Election as well, especially if COVID-19 makes a resurgence in the fall. Among them:

- Established polling places must be large enough for social distancing and **poll workers must have the proper personal protective equipment (PPE) to keep them safe** and to sanitize the polling places to protect voters as well.
- Even with increased mail-in voting, **in-person voting opportunities must remain in every county**, as mail-in and absentee ballots will not be an option for every eligible voter. Several communities face a digital divide that makes printing ballots or accessing public spaces that may still be closed to use computers untenable. Individuals with disabilities and those with limited English proficiency must have access to a polling location.

- Looking ahead to the November election, where social distancing may still be required, **county boards of elections should be permitted to create vote centers or introduce curbside drop-off** to replace precincts that close. In addition, the legislature should make a law that guarantees that all eligible voters are sent mail ballot application.
- Registered voters should be encouraged to capitalize on the new, safe, secure **option to vote by mail for both the June 2 Primary Election and Nov. 3 General Election**, with the state taking the lead to engage stakeholders on coordinate promotion and inform residents about the new option and changed deadlines for accessing and submitting ballots. **The state also must consider extending the deadline for returning absentee and mailed ballots.**
- Experience in other states makes it clear that many mail voters will want to know when their ballot is coming to them in the mail, and when the voted ballot they send back is received. **Implementing ballot tracking software or some other means to make it simple for voters to obtain this information** without overburdening county election offices is imperative.
- The General Assembly must **ensure funding is available and that all costs related to election administration changes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic are covered by the state** rather than by the counties or through the Pennsylvania Department of State.

Continued bipartisan leadership is crucial to navigating through the unfamiliar circumstances created by COVID-19. Additional legislative action may be required from the General Assembly and administration, depending on how the situation evolves over the coming weeks and months.

“The General Assembly still has time to make sure funding is in place to guarantee a free and fair election in June AND in November, but the clock is ticking,” Murphy said. “The counties made good points today about what they need, but the legislature must also consider what the actual voters of this state need in order to safely and securely cast their ballot. This matters to all eligible Pennsylvanians, but especially voters of color, low-income Pennsylvanians, people with disabilities, and all of those who are most directly suffering as a result of this global pandemic.”

The passage of Act 77 of 2019 ushered in the most sweeping election reforms in Pennsylvania in 80 years. Last month, lawmakers moved Pennsylvania’s Primary Election from April 28 to June 2 with Act 12 of 2020, which also advanced provisions to help to ensure residents’ health and safety while protecting the integrity of our elections.

For a copy of Keystone Votes’ testimony, click [here](#).

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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.