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TO: Members, House State Government Committee
FROM: Douglas E. Hill, Executive Director
SUBJECT: Vote by Mail Hearing
DATE: June 4, 2008

On behalf of the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania, representing all 67 counties in the Commonwealth, thank you for the opportunity to offer these written comments to the House State Government Committee on the topic of voting by mail. We regret that we will not be able to participate in today's House State Government Committee hearing on the matter.

CCAP opposes voting by mail. The Association was part of the Governor's Pennsylvania Election Reform Task Force, which also voted unanimously against voting by mail. We have several arguments against the proposal:

- **Security of the Ballot.** Voting by mail can pose a number of issues with the security of the ballot, increasing the chances of voter fraud, intimidation, and buying votes. Under our current system, when a voter comes to the polling place, candidates and electioneers must maintain an appropriate distance from the actual voting area, and the ballot is cast in secrecy in a safe and controlled environment. Under vote by mail, there is no way to guarantee this secrecy, or to guard against intimidation or vote buying by employers, labor representatives, spouses, and others. Even absent coercion, an apathetic voter could hand off their ballot to someone else to vote, then sign on their own behalf and send it in to be counted. Admittedly, these are issues that arise with absentee ballots, but those ballots under the current system count for such a small percentage of the votes cast that they rarely rise to a level that makes a difference in the voting outcome.

A second security issue is that ballots would be mailed to registered voters based on their last updated address, but we would have no way of guaranteeing that the registered voter actually received the ballot.

Another technical problem is how we would meet the HAVA requirement that first-time voters have to present identification at their polling place.

- **Counting the Vote.** Vote by mail would rely on scan systems to count the vote, requiring a new investment by counties – currently a large majority – that use DRE voting equipment.
- **Voting as a Communal Experience.** A vote by mail system would abandon the civic experience of going to the polling place on election day to cast a vote with other members of the community. It also denies voters the last minute opportunity to talk with candidates and their representatives about the issues important to them, and in fact could be problematic were there to be election developments occurring during the time line between first-date and last-date for mailing in the ballots.
- **High cost.** With mail-in voting, we have to consider the cost of postage to send the ballot to the voter. We presume that the voter would be responsible for the cost of postage to return the ballot, or to drop it off at the county elections office. If the state went to a strictly vote by mail system, we understand that there would be time and dollar savings by not having to secure polling places or poll workers, and not incurring the direct costs for poll worker training and election day compensation, for example. Presuming however that, for a transition period, counties would have to administer a vote by mail and continue to operate polling places, net costs would be much higher in those intervening years.

A higher cost is abandonment of the \$100 million investment Pennsylvania counties made in 2006 to purchase new HAVA-compliant voting equipment. Only a handful of counties implemented optical scan ballots which would be conducive to vote-by-mail. The rest are DRE systems, all of which would have to be replaced with optical scan to accommodate mail balloting.

In place of the vote by mail system, we support the Election Reform Task Force recommendation offering no-excuse absentee voting as an alternative. This would allow individuals to vote by absentee ballot without having to prove that they will not be in the county on the day of the election, allowing some of the convenience of vote by mail for the limited number of people who prefer not to go to the polls, while preserving our public voting process.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer these comments. We would be pleased to respond to Committee questions or furnish additional information.