

## Committee of Seventy

### Hearing to Determine Pennsylvania's Readiness for November 4, 2008 General Election

Pennsylvania House of Representatives  
State Government Committee

September 25, 2008

---

Good afternoon. I am Sarah Stevenson, Assistant Policy Director at the Committee of Seventy here to testify today on our preparations for the General Election on November 4<sup>th</sup>. Thank you to Majority Chairwoman Babette Josephs and members of the House State Government Committee for this opportunity.

The Committee of Seventy is a non-profit organization that has conducted non-partisan election oversight in Philadelphia for over one hundred years. As technology has advanced, so has the sophistication and reach of our program. Between now and November Fourth, we expect to recruit and train close to 800 non-partisan volunteers to answer phones or visit polling places around the City and close suburbs on Election Day. Seventy has partnered with the national Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights since November 2004 and is pleased to do so again this fall, along with other local organizations.

If voters, campaigns or polling officials encounter a problem on Election Day, they can call toll-free 1-866-OUR-VOTE (1-866-687-8683) to speak to trained volunteers who will either offer a solution over the phone, dispatch a mobile field team to the polling location to address the problem, or notify the proper law enforcement agency.

Given the large turnout expected in November, the contentiousness of the presidential race, and our experience monitoring past elections, Seventy has identified potential problems to be aware of on Election Day in Philadelphia. These include:

- a. Long lines and general stress on the system in overcrowded divisions,
- b. Improper challenges of voters,
- c. Minority party election board members or credentialed poll watchers being turned away,
- d. Intimidation of voters,

- e. Improper influence on or assistance of voters, and
- f. Voters going to the incorrect polling place, or failing to bring sufficient identification if necessary.

To help prevent these problems, or address them if and when they arise, Seventy has taken or will take the following actions:

- a. To reduce long lines and general stress on the system, over the summer, Seventy asked the City Commissioners to realign the sixteen divisions in Philadelphia hosting more than 1200 registered voters. We have not yet received a formal response, although at the Commissioners' public meeting this week, a staff member reported that the City's most populous division, Ward 5 Division 13, will hopefully be split before the spring primary. In the meantime, Seventy plans to devote extra resources to highly populated polling places on Election Day. Although the opportunities in Pennsylvania are limited, we will also educate the public on early voting options, such as absentee and alternative voting, to hopefully shorten lines at the polls. On Election Day, we will keep an eye on provisional ballot totals to make sure depleted supplies are replenished as soon as possible. Moving forward, Seventy will certainly keep realignment of overcrowded divisions high on our agenda.
- b. To help ensure political campaigns and their volunteers are aware of proper procedures, as usual Seventy will reach out to educate them on Pennsylvania Election Law, including the proper grounds for challenges and how a voter can respond. We also encourage voters, campaigns, and election officials to contact us immediately on Election Day if they experience or witness improper challenges.
- c. Seventy has received complaints in the past that some minority party poll watchers and election officials have been denied access to their assigned polling place. We urge election officials to respect the rights of their colleagues, and we are also in direct communication with attorneys from the City's Law Department who can address this issue on Election Day.

- d. Varying levels of intimidation are reported to Seventy every election. Voters should contact us immediately if they feel intimidated in any way at the polls. On Election Day, we are in direct communication with the District Attorney's office and the Law Department, as well as the United States Department of Justice, to immediately address these problems.
- e. Voters who experience or witness undue influence, including electioneering, or improper assistance at the polling place are also encouraged to call our hotline immediately. A field team will be dispatched to the polling location and, if necessary, we will notify the appropriate law enforcement agency.
- f. Seventy serves as a year-round resource to voters so they arrive at the polling place well prepared. Between now and Election Day, Seventy will conduct aggressive voter and media education through live and electronic communications. Seventy just launched its new website, to which we continuously add voter education materials. A polling place locator is also available on our website and through a toll-free phone number (1-866-268-8603). We are also holding voter education seminars in ESL communities (in Russian and Asian communities in particular).

Overall, Seventy is optimistic about a clean election on November 4<sup>th</sup>. However, we are sensitive to prior reports of misbehavior and will do what we can before and on Election Day to deter and respond to problems. The best way to ease pressure on the system is for voters, candidates, and election officials to each take responsibility for what is in their control. If voters check their registration status and locate their polling place ahead of time, they will save time and aggravation on Election Day. Also, election officials must be well trained on the law and procedures that govern elections. As public officials, poll workers should be expected to attend trainings and keep their houses in order on Election Day. Lastly, campaigns are responsible for properly training their watchers and volunteers.

Problems will pop up – this we can be sure of. It should be our collective goal to pinpoint and solve them as swiftly as possible so no one in the Commonwealth is prevented or deterred from voting. In the long run, we should continually look for ways to improve elections in Pennsylvania. The Committee of Seventy is proud to be a part of this effort.