

**2016 Election Hearing
House State Government Committee
October 4, 2016**

**Testimony of Secretary Pedro A. Cortés
Pennsylvania Department of State**

Chairman Metcalfe, Chairman Cohen and members of the House State Government Committee:

Good morning. Thank you for the invitation to appear before the House State Government Committee to discuss the Department of State's voter registration initiatives and preparedness plan for the general election in November. The Department of State is committed to providing every eligible Pennsylvania citizen the opportunity to register to vote, access to the polls, and assurance that elections will be administered securely. The Department, working closely with county, state and federal partners, is confident that Pennsylvania will deliver a good general election as we have done in the past.

The Department, through its Bureau of Commissions, Elections and Legislation (BCEL), is continually striving to bring about the highest level of efficiency, integrity and uniformity in the elections process. BCEL ensures compliance with a wide range of legislation, including the National Voter Registration Act, the Help America Vote Act and the Pennsylvania election code. Simultaneously, we educate the electorate and assist the counties with their election-related preparations.

This year, we are working to support the counties as they deal with the increased activity that accompanies each presidential election year.

One of the core functions of the Department is to encourage all eligible citizens to exercise their right to vote. In keeping with that mission, Governor Tom Wolf and I introduced online voter registration (OVR) last year. The online voter registration application was immediately embraced by the public, the counties and other stakeholders. The application drew 5,000 users in the first week. By the end of 2015, usage had topped 56,000. The system allows the public to easily and conveniently apply for a new registration or update their existing registration. On September 17, 2016, just a year after being in operation, the OVR system logged its 500,000 user. To date, approximately 58 percent of users have been eligible citizens registering for the first time, while the remaining 42 percent were voters making updates to their existing voter registration, such as a change of name, address or party affiliation.

The OVR system, available in English or Spanish, is more secure for applicants because the form is transmitted directly to the appropriate county voter registration office for processing. The latest protocols in data security have been built into the system and are constantly monitored and updated.

Earlier this year, a signature-upload feature was added to the application, making registration a fully online process even for those who do not have a Pennsylvania driver's license or PennDOT ID card.

County election officials have confirmed our expectation that OVR improves accuracy and reduces time-consuming data entry. Throughout the development and implementation process, we coordinated with the Department of Transportation's Bureau of Motor Vehicles to provide OVR users with a seamless application process.

In addition to OVR, the Department has rolled out additional tools to assist Pennsylvania's eligible but unregistered voters with the process. For example, the Department

recently launched **2Vote**, a voter registration text messaging service. Users can text “PA” to “2Vote” (28683) on a smartphone. In return, they receive links to the OVR application, DOS voter registration status page, polling place locator and the contact information for county election offices and the Department of State. As of September 28, 2016, the 2Vote application has been accessed 1,063 times.

Another significant step taken by DOS earlier this year was to join the non-partisan, national record-matching consortium Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC). The mission of ERIC is to assist states in improving the accuracy of America’s voter rolls and increasing access to voter registration for all eligible citizens. ERIC was founded in 2012 with financial and technical assistance from the Pew Charitable Trusts. Today it is a non-profit corporation completely owned, governed and managed by state elections officials. At present, 20 states and the District of Columbia are members of the consortium.

As required by the ERIC membership agreement, on September 9 the Department began to mail postcards to Pennsylvanians who are eligible to vote but may not yet be registered. The mailing list was compiled by comparing statewide voter registration records against almost 10 million PennDOT records. PennDOT removed from the mailing list the names of individuals who are ineligible to vote because they are not U.S. citizens or under 18 years of age as of Election Day (November 8).

It has come to the Department’s attention that out of the 2.3 million mailers sent out, seven (7) persons were not eligible to vote because they are not yet citizens. We are providing that information to PennDOT for research.

In anticipation of the possibility that a few recipients may not qualify to register and following the guidance from the ERIC consortium, the mailer was carefully worded to clearly

state that U.S. citizenship is a requirement for registration and voting. We also included a sentence that encouraged those who believed they had received the mailing in error to contact the Department of State's toll-free number 1-877 VOTESPA (1-877-868-3772). Moreover, anyone who uses the Department's online voter registration application is asked if they are a U.S. citizen. If the individual selects "No," the system immediately informs the person that he/she is not eligible to register and may not proceed.

The Department has also extended its outreach efforts to electors who may need to vote by absentee ballot. The deadline to apply for a civilian absentee ballot is November 1. Due to changes in United States Postal Service (USPS) delivery standards, the Department has actively encouraged citizens who must vote by absentee ballot to submit their requests as early as possible to ensure that their absentee ballot is received and counted on or before November 4, 2016.

Earlier this year, members of BCEL and executive staff toured and met with officials at the USPS regional facility in Harrisburg. We were able to hear first-hand the process and the expected turnaround times for in-state and out-of-state mailings. With that information, our team generated press releases, downloadable documents and social media campaigns to inform the public. There were approximately 84,565 absentee ballots returned for the 2016 April primary and 266,587 in 2012 for the last presidential election.

In recent weeks, there has been talk about vulnerabilities in the nation's election infrastructure. Our election staff is working closely with our county election directors as well as federal and state agencies to prepare for and safeguard our elections.

Department of State staff recently joined election officials nationwide in a conference call with U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Jeh Johnson. During that call,

Secretary Johnson offered his agency's assistance in conducting risk assessments as the states prepare their election systems for the November balloting. Pennsylvania took up Secretary Johnson on his offer and is currently working with DHS.

Our goal is to proactively take any steps to make sure that Pennsylvania's statewide election infrastructure is as secure as possible. To that end, please keep in mind Pennsylvania does not permit any precinct voting systems to be connected to the Internet. That prohibition remains in place.

In addition, DOS has provided to the counties guidance regarding good cyber security practices for elections, including isolating computers from networks, strict password and privilege management. We have also shared information on best practices on pre-election logic and accuracy testing, securing voting equipment and transmitting election night returns.

The majority of the information we have communicated to the counties has been provided in the past. Still, we reissue and enhance for the benefit of election personnel – whether they are seasoned administrators or less tenured.

Adherence to the processes in the guidance will minimize the risks associated with any election. The Department also recommends that counties refer to guidelines issued by the federal Election Assistance Commission.

Another valuable collaboration is that of the Commonwealth's Chief Information Security Officer and the DHS Security Liaison to monitor threats and respond appropriately. The Governor's Office of Information Technology (OIT) takes appropriate steps to guard the Commonwealth's systems and to defend them against cyber-attacks. OIT continuously identifies potential vulnerabilities and takes steps to minimize damage and recovery time should attacks occur.

In conclusion, the Department continues to work diligently with counties and other partners to deliver excellence in elections. You can count on our commitment to do our jobs and do it well.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today.