

National Vote at Home Institute
Amber McReynolds | CEO
www.voteathome.org

Testimony of Amber McReynolds, *CEO of the National Vote at Home Institute, Election Administration Expert, Author, and former Elections Official*

Submitted to the House State Government Committee, March 18, 2021

Chairman Grove, Chairman Davidson, I am pleased to submit this testimony regarding improving vote at home systems in Pennsylvania. As you know, the COVID-19 pandemic has upended all aspects of our lives and the voting process is no different. Simply put, our democracy is essential and we must do everything we can to ensure our election system is ready, resilient, and secure. In 2020, election officials across the country worked tirelessly to make this happen, even in extremely challenging circumstances and often with one hand tied behind their backs due to outdated laws and a lack of funding and resources.

Pennsylvania made historic changes to the Commonwealth's voting system through the passage of Act 77 of 2019 and Act 12 of 2020. The National Vote at Home Institute appreciates the House State Government's thorough examination of elections in Pennsylvania and hopes to act as a resource as further progress is considered by the General Assembly.

Extraordinarily long lines at the polls, differing interpretations of guidance by Pennsylvania counties, and the departure of election officials from their positions in 2020 have been visible issues driving a reexamination of what additional policy or resources may benefit Pennsylvania voters. We have seen long lines repeated in various election cycles and yet, in many states, the necessary adjustments have not been made to rectify this issue. Election officials are on the front lines, delivering democracy to all voters in small towns and in metro areas, and it is incumbent upon the government to provide the resources needed to ensure that elections are conducted efficiently and securely.

What is clear to me during this pandemic and other challenges we have faced as a nation is that Americans are resilient, and we need a voting process that is proven and responsive, whether that be to a pandemic, unfairness, barriers, foreign adversaries, administrative deficiencies, or outdated policies that create challenges. **If more voters are requesting absentee and mail-in ballots, then policymakers should respond to that trend.**

The fact is the pandemic has exposed the dangers of most states' historical reliance on in-person voting on one single day, which requires a large number of people and resources to manage. In too many primary states in 2020, the closure of polling places, poll worker shortages, long lines,

insufficient training, voters' reluctance to enter crowded environments, and surges in absentee ballot requests that went unfulfilled left many voters unable to safely exercise their fundamental right to vote. Enabling voting at home options is one way to help solve the challenges election officials, and by extension voters, face during this pandemic. Voting by mail is proven, time-tested, and secure, and it dates back to the Civil War.

A voting model that provides a robust vote by mail program and empowers individual voters with more options has proven to be flexible during both natural disasters and the current pandemic. It is possible to improve the voting experience, streamline the administrative process, enhance security, all while conserving valuable resources, increasing turnout, and increasing trust in government. Voters have been voting at home safely and securely for decades in many states.

What does the process look like?

1. **In 9 states plus DC (CA, CO, DC, HI, NJ, NV, OR, UT, VT, and WA)** voters were mailed a ballot in advance of the election and had multiple options to return their ballot at a secure drop box, voting location, or by mailing the ballot back through the postal service.

In the rest of the states, voters could request that a ballot be mailed to them. A small number of those states still required an excuse to be provided with the ballot request, and even fewer limited options based on a voter's age.

Every state offers an option to vote from home. Whether you call it absentee, vote by mail, mail-in ballots - it means that a ballot is being sent to the voter, the voter completes the ballot, and the ballot is returned.

2. **Voting at home is a safe and secure method of voting** and the process includes security measures that ensure the authenticity of ballots. In some states, the process includes tracking ballots from the day they are printed to the day they are processed. Just like tracking a package ordered online.

3. **Accurate voter information is key** which requires that election officials have the latest address information for each voter. Most states share information on voter movement across state lines, others directly contact voters based on mail forwarding designations, death records, motor vehicle registrations, and more to make sure voter information is accurate. Automatic address updates along with joining systems like ERIC can assist with this aspect of the model.

4. **Your ballot is as unique as you are:** Every voter gets a ballot with barcodes on the envelope that correspond to the individual voter and the voter's address. The ballot itself has a removable stub, the information for the specific election, precinct style, and other variables depending on the state.

5. **Once ballots are dropped off, each ballot goes through a verification process:** During the process, election officials make sure that the voting record of each voter is marked and that the ballot envelope is verified before the ballot is counted, much like when a voter checks in at their polling location. **Signature verification is a best practice security measure when combined with appropriate processes:** Voters sign their ballot the same way they sign other legal documents, and that signature is verified against other official signatures on record. When done according to best practices like demographically blind review, signature verification is an important security measure that leads to greater election confidence. Also voters with signature issues are given the opportunity to "cure" their ballots, meaning that they are able to directly verify the authenticity of their ballot. **The ballot is then extracted from the envelope.** The extraction process protects voter privacy, while maintaining the voter's identity in the barcoding process for security. Audits are conducted at each step and these audits ensure that every eligible vote received in the designated timeframe is counted. **Then the ballots are sent to the counting room** and at this point, state of the art scanning equipment counts each batch of ballots. Voter intent issues on ballots (such as stray marks) are flagged for review and resolved by election officials. Finally, the ballots that were scanned are tallied, which happens at the time that polls close.

Notable considerations and recommendations:

1. As noted in the CISA Report released on July 31, 2020, "Disinformation risk to mail-in voting infrastructure and processes is similar to that of in-person voting while utilizing different content. Threat actors may leverage limited understanding regarding mail-in voting to mislead and confuse the public." Thus, it is critically important that election officials have the ability and the resources to provide clear communication to the public about the voting process and respond to misinformation in order to ensure the election process is secure and reliable. .

2. Coordination with the postal service is critical in the conduct of elections. Mail ballots are just one piece of how the postal service supports the election infrastructure and process. Federal and state laws mandate certain mailings with regards to voter registration confirmations and information, ballot issue notices, election information, poll worker appointment letters, polling place notification cards, signature cards, address update notifications, and other required mailings.

3. A key recommendation is implementation of ballot tracking solutions. Ballot tracking is incredibly useful to both voters and election officials and the process can increase voter trust in the system. Pennsylvania can expand and improve ballot tracking systems.

4. Another key recommendation is expanding the use of secure ballot drop-off options. There are various versions of this including 24 hour secure boxes, drive-up drop off options, or staffed drop-off boxes at businesses or other locations.

5. We must be creative with our solutions for the future to improve election operations and streamline administrative processes. We produced a strategic plan in 2020 that explains operational considerations:

http://voteathome.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/VAHScale_StrategyPlan.pdf

That plan included creative solutions to scale and implement a centralized (or regionalized) ballot processing facility within states to reduce the burden on local officials and leveraging economies of scale when processing ballots. Similarly, it is critical for local election officials to plan for the increase in the use of vote by mail and adjust staffing, resources, and equipment accordingly. We also provide operational toolkits that help election officials with this task:

<https://voteathome.org/elections-officials-operational-toolkit/>

6. Pennsylvania is an example of a state which would benefit significantly from additional pre-canvassing time to ensure adequate time to process mail ballots. Local election officials have echoed this recommendation, as it would allow them to better allocate their time and process ballots more efficiently.

7. A consistent communications strategy for voters is critical. Election officials are responsible for providing clear and consistent communications to voters about the voting process to allow the voter sufficient time to request an absentee ballot, enable election offices to process the request, and allow the voter time to receive, consider, complete and mail the absentee ballot back to ensure their vote is received in time. Our communications toolkit can help with this recommendation:

<https://voteathome.org/comms-toolkit/>

8. As with every part of our election system, we must be able to detect, deter, and hold accountable any bad actor who tries to interfere with the election process or with an individual voter. While voter fraud is exceedingly rare in elections regardless of voting method, it is still critical for election officials to detect malicious activity and for voters to report suspicious activity to appropriate authorities.

Our democracy functions well when every eligible voter is able to exercise their right to vote.

Voters chose to vote at home in record numbers in 2020. Voters — the customers of our democracy — are sending a very clear message about how they want to vote; policymakers should respond to the needs of election officials to ensure they have the resources to serve voters effectively.

No election system is perfect, and this is why it is critical to continually review and improve systems by enhancing security, access, and transparency, particularly in this unprecedented time. An example of a necessary improvement is the implementation of ballot tracking systems that provide accountability to voters about the status of their ballot and give election officials an ability to track ballots through the process. Another example is advanced auditing techniques such as risk-limiting audits.

Democracy is the shared DNA of our nation. We must do everything we can to ensure that it works for all, even in this most trying time. Thank you for your consideration of this testimony. The National Vote at Home Institute would look forward to an opportunity to continue to act as a resource as the General Assembly considers further enhancements to the Commonwealth's election system.