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**TESTIMONY FOR SECRETARY OF STATE ELECTIONS TASK FORCE  
July 1, 2020**

The ACLU of Rhode Island appreciates the creation of a task force to review the workings of the June 2<sup>nd</sup> Presidential Preference Primary and to plan for the upcoming state elections in September and November. While we believe that there are many steps that can and – in light of the ongoing pandemic – must be taken to protect the rights and health of voters, the most significant point we want to raise is the urgency of taking action. That action cannot await the results of this task force’s deliberations. We hope that this task force will agree with that assessment and join us and many other organizations in seeing some immediate steps taken.

We understand that within the next few weeks, the Secretary of State’s office will need to have its mail ballot applications and envelopes prepared for printing. This means that some key decisions must be made immediately – such as whether, like the June 2<sup>nd</sup> primary, witness and notarization requirements will be waived, and whether the SOS plans to send mail ballot applications to all voters, and if so, whether one application will suffice for a voter to obtain mail ballots for both the September and November elections.

Yesterday, sixteen organizations from the Voting Access Coalition, representing diverse interests but unified in their concern for voting rights, sent letters to the Governor, Secretary of State and Board of Elections to point out some of those issues that require immediate attention. Rather than repeat all these points, I have included copies of those letters with this testimony.

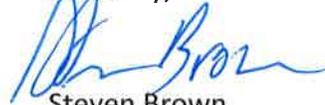
There appears to be a consensus among state leaders, community groups and the general public generally that, while there were bumps in the road in the efforts to turn the June primary into a mail ballot election in a very short period of time – bumps that need to be smoothed over in time for the upcoming elections – it was overall a great success. The overwhelming use of mail ballots, and the consequent protection of the public health that those mail ballot returns signify, cannot be overstated. However, in order to make it work again – and work better – the State simply does not have time to dawdle in preparing for the upcoming elections.

As members of the Task Force are aware, the ACLU was forced to file a lawsuit a few weeks ago to ensure an alternative method was available for candidates to gather declaration signatures in a way that did not require personal contact. Litigation was necessary because, frankly, we made the mistake of believing that the executive and legislative branches would resolve this problem in a reasonable and timely manner. In extending that courtesy, we then found ourselves confronted by arguments from some defendants that we had waited too long to go into court to seek relief.

We think it is in everybody's best interests not to let such a scenario play out again. We thus are hopeful that the appropriate state officials will act expeditiously, and that this Task Force will support the emergency actions urged in the enclosed letters from the Voting Access Coalition.

We thank the Task Force for considering our views, and are hopeful that you will agree about the urgency in taking action now.

Sincerely,



Steven Brown

Executive Director

Enclosures