



June 30, 2020

Ms. Diane Mederos
Chair, Rhode Island Board of Elections
200 Plainfield Pike
Cranston, RI 02921

Dear Chair Mederos:

On behalf of the Voting Access Coalition, an alliance of more than 15 organizations in the state promoting the exercise of the franchise and fairness in elections, we thank you and the Board for your work on the recent Presidential Preference Primary (PPP) and the improvisation that was necessary to conduct an election in the midst of a pandemic. However, we also believe that several crucial steps must be taken immediately in order to prepare for the upcoming elections and avoid some of the problems we saw on June 2nd.

Recently, our groups expressed our support for the Safe and Healthy Voting in 2020 Act, a bill that was drafted by the Secretary of State to address procedures for the upcoming elections in light of the continuing challenges posed by Covid-19. However, the General Assembly finished its recent session without introducing the bill,

and we feel that there are several immediate executive actions that must be taken in the absence of any legislative direction.

Specifically, we are writing to you today to urge the Board to take over the responsibility for the process for qualifying mail ballots for the September Statewide Primary and November General Election. The lack of centralization proved to be a bottleneck during the recent PPP, and we believe it contributed to many voters receiving their ballots without enough time to return them by postal mail before the election night deadline and some voters not receiving their ballots at all. Without the Board assuming this responsibility for the upcoming elections, we believe the boards of canvassers will be overwhelmed by mail ballot applications.

As you know, the Board of Elections enjoys extraordinary power in Rhode Island, and we believe it is within your power to assume this responsibility. You also have the ability to scale this operation as you did for the mail ballot qualification process for the PPP. However, this decision must be made now so that the Secretary of State has enough time to order mail ballot application return envelopes with the BOE's address rather than that of the applicant's board of canvassers.

There are other crucial changes we believe must be made immediately for the fall elections to be successful. That is why we also wrote a letter today to Secretary of State Nellie Gorbea urging her to send applications for mail ballots to all registered voters at least 45 days prior to the September 8th Statewide Primary as she had proposed in her legislation. We believe that she does not need legislative authorization, nor an executive order, to take this important step to safeguard the health of voters and preserve access to the ballot.

Finally, we have written to Governor Gina Raimondo urging her to issue an executive order that would make two changes for the fall. We asked her to waive the statutory requirement of two witness signatures or a notary signature on the voted mail ballot as she did for June 2nd. The waiving of the requirement for witnesses or a notary must be done now to allow the Secretary of State enough time to order the mail ballot envelopes with the proper instructions for September.

We also asked the Governor to extend the deadline for the Board of Elections to tabulate mail ballots so long as they are postmarked by election day, or received through the mail the day after the election, knowing that more than 2,000 voters were disenfranchised during the PPP by the current early deadline.

Time is running out for the voters of Rhode Island. Around the country we are seeing state legislatures, governors, secretaries of state, boards of elections, and in the last resort, courts, make needed changes to prepare for the fall elections. We urge the Board of Elections to show leadership in this time of crisis and commit to making the necessary changes described above to assume responsibility for qualifying the mail ballot applications in order to protect the vote and preserve the health of Rhode Islanders. We also ask you to join with us in supporting the asks we have made of the Governor and Secretary of State to promote a fair, equitable and safe election season.

In light of the urgency of the situation, we hope to hear back from you as soon as possible about these matters. Members of our Coalition would be happy to talk with you further about them.

Sincerely,

John Marion
Common Cause Rhode Island
Executive Director