

NEWS RELEASE

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Civil Rights, Community, and Social Service Organizations Denounce Signing of Voter ID Legislation

A diverse array of fifteen civil rights, community, open government and social service organizations today released a letter sent to Governor Lincoln Chafee, criticizing his decision last week to sign into law a bill imposing a photo identification requirement on all Rhode Island voters. The letter specifically took issue with comments made by the Governor justifying his action: that he “spoke with representatives of our state's minority communities” and “found their concerns about voter fraud and their support for this bill particularly compelling.”

The letter – signed by, among others, the NAACP Providence Branch, Progreso Latino, R.I. Coalition for the Homeless, R.I. Disability Law Center, ULMAC, Direct Action for Rights and Equality, R.I. ACLU, and Common Cause RI – noted that none of their organizations, “representing a wide array of minority community constituencies in Rhode Island,” had ever expressed support for the bill, nor did any other organizations representing minority communities testify in favor of the legislation at State House hearings.

While noting “the damage has been done” with the signing of the bill, the letter said “we would be remiss in being silent and letting stand uncorrected your comments that this bill will help, rather than hurt, the minority community, or that it is necessary to deal with what we believe to be the virtually non-existent problem of voter impersonation fraud. Neither position, in our view, can withstand scrutiny.”

The letter concluded by stating: “Regrettably, this bill represents a significant and shameful step backward in the fight for equality at the voting booth. The right to vote is one of the most precious civil rights in our society. As President Lyndon Johnson spoke when he addressed Congress on the Voting Rights Act, ‘There is no duty which weighs more heavily on us than the duty we have to ensure that right.’ The enactment of this law without a scintilla of objective evidence to justify its passage may be ‘compelling,’ but compelling only in demonstrating how elusive the goal remains of protecting this fundamental right from unnecessary barriers for those who have faced the greatest obstacles in exercising it for over 200 years.”

In recent months, Governors in five states have vetoed photo ID laws, citing their adverse impact on the democratic process and the right to vote. A copy of the groups’ letter is attached.