

July 13, 2011

The Hon. Lincoln Chafee
Governor
State House
Providence, RI 02903

Dear Governor Chafee:

We the undersigned organizations write to express our frustration and dismay at your comments last week justifying your decision to sign legislation requiring voters to present photo identification in order to vote at the ballot box. As groups that represent a wide variety of constituencies in Rhode Island, including, among others, ethnic and racial minorities, we want to bring to your attention the breadth of organizational opposition to this new law.

In your statement explaining your decision to sign the legislation, you claim that you "spoke with representatives of our state's minority communities, and I found their concerns about voter fraud and their support for this bill particularly compelling." With respect, we would appreciate learning exactly who these representatives of minority communities you talked to are. None of our groups, representing a wide array of minority community constituencies in Rhode Island, has ever expressed support for this bill. Further, to our knowledge, not one organization representing minority communities testified in support of this bill at either the House or Senate committee hearings. To the contrary: on the eve of the Senate vote on this bill, twenty community, civil rights, social service and labor organizations held a news conference to denounce this legislation and its impact on various vulnerable communities. We therefore trust you can appreciate both our puzzlement and consternation at your stated justification.

We recognize that some minority *legislators* actively supported the bill, but it is no reflection on them to note that their own understandable vested interests in the electoral process might differ somewhat from minority community organizations on an issue like this.

In any event, as you are aware, it is not just racial minorities that bear the brunt of voter ID legislation. The studies are clear that the poor, the homeless, the elderly and people with disabilities may also be adversely impacted by this legislation. As far as we know, no representatives from any of these communities, a number of whom are represented in this letter, were sought out in making your decision. In short, if you had sought guidance from organizations that represent the communities you indicate prompted you to sign the bill, we do not see how you could have justified your support for this legislation as you have done.

At this point, of course, the damage has been done. But 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.

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.

Sincerely,

Jim Vincent - NAACP Providence Branch
P.O. Box 5767 - Providence, RI 02903

Nick Figueroa - Univocal Legislative Minority Advisory Coalition (ULMAC)
P.O. Box 41633 - Providence, RI 02940

Marta Martinez - Progreso Latino

Jim Ryczek - Rhode Island Coalition for the Homeless

Chanravy Proeung - Providence Youth Student Movement (PrYSM)

Raymond L. Bandusky - Rhode Island Disability Law Center

Fred Ordonez - Direct Action for Rights and Equality (DARE)

Carolyn Mark - Rhode Island NOW

Kate Brewster - The Poverty Institute

John Marion - Common Cause Rhode Island

Steven Brown - R.I. Affiliate, American Civil Liberties Union

Kate Brock - Ocean State Action

Jean Lawlor - R.I. Disability Vote Project

Martha Yager - American Friends Service Committee, SENE

Elizabeth V. Earls- R.I. Council of Community Mental Health Organizations