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HOUSE MAJORITY POLICY COMMITTEE

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMONWEALTH *of* PENNSYLVANIA

House Democratic Policy Committee Hearing
Voting Rights & Access

Wednesday, May 22, 2024 | 9:00 a.m.
Representative Aerion Abney

OPENING REMARKS

9:00 a.m. Rep. Aerion Abney, D-Allegheny

PANEL ONE

9:05 a.m. Rev. Franklin Allen, President
NAACP Greater Harrisburg

Kadida Kenner, Chief Executive Officer
New Pennsylvania Project

Q & A with Legislators

PANEL TWO

9:40 a.m. Dr. Amy Widestrom, Executive Director
League of Women Voters of Pennsylvania

Salewa Ogunmefun, Executive Director
Pennsylvania Voice

Q & A with Legislators



Honorable Ryan Bizzarro, Chairman
Pennsylvania House of Representatives'
Democratic Policy Committee

Re: May 22, 2024 Hearing Testimony, NAACP Greater Harrisburg Branch

Dear Chairman Bizzarro,

I'd like to start off by thanking you for the invitation for the NAACP Greater Harrisburg Branch to speak as part of the House Democratic Policy Committee hearing.

As you may know, the NAACP is our nation's oldest Civil Rights organization. Our mission is to achieve equity, political rights, and social inclusion by advancing policies and practices that expand human and civil rights, eliminate discrimination, and accelerate the well-being, education, and economic security of black people and all persons of color.

I was installed as President of the Greater Harrisburg Area NAACP in January 2017, and was re-elected for the 2022 – 2024 year. Also, I serve as the Greater Harrisburg Economic Chair. I previously served as President and Economic Chair of the Ralph Bunch NAACP Branch in Benton, Arkansas. While there, I also served as Senior Pastor at Benton Church. In addition, I served as Chaplin of the Arkansas State penitentiary for 5 years.

As President of the Greater Harrisburg Area, I am committed to carrying out the mission of civil rights advocacy for the citizens of the Greater Harrisburg Area. During my tenure, our annual NAACP Greater Harrisburg Area Freedom Fund Dinner has served as our primary fundraiser to support our efforts with Veterans, homeless individuals, along with college, and youth, in addition to health and Voter education.

This year, we will host our 70th Platinum Jubilee Annual Freedom Fund Dinner on October 12, 2024, celebrating "70 Years of Culture, Community, and Power".

Thank you for the opportunity to highlight and expand on the organization's efforts to increase voter accessibility and ensure equal access to the ballot, provide education, and raise awareness about the significance of exercising our individual rights to vote and the power we each hold when we exercise those rights.

Sincerely,

Dr. Reverend Franklin Allen, President
NAACP Greater Harrisburg Branch

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Kadida Kenner, CEO, New Pennsylvania Project Testimony: Voting Rights House Democratic Policy Committee Hearing

May 22, 2024

Good morning, distinguished members of the House Democratic Policy Committee, Chairman Ryan Bizzaro, and other invited and distinguished guests.

My name is Kadida Kenner. I am the founding Chief Executive Officer of two voting rights organizations, both founded in 2021, and I live in Chester County.

The New Pennsylvania Project (NPP) is a voting rights organization with a year-round primary focus on voter registration, civic education and mobilization. NPP centers historically disenfranchised and often neglected Black, Indigenous and other people of color, immigrant communities and the youth in our work. Through civic engagement, we ensure all eligible voters feel compelled to exercise their freedom to vote in the Commonwealth.

The New PA Project Education Fund (NPPEF) is a non-partisan organization led by community leaders across the Commonwealth dedicated to centering underrepresented and underserved communities to embrace their power. NPPEF ensures full participation in the democratic process through civic education and year-round engagement by centering Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, immigrant communities and the youth - with intention - as they are the least represented and most impacted by decisions our government is making.

I'm pleased to present my testimony this morning in advocacy for the expansion of our voting rights in the Commonwealth.

Although Pennsylvania is not the most difficult state to access the ballot and exercise our freedom to vote, the birthplace of American democracy should be the leader in voting rights accessibility and the enfranchisement of all eligible participants in the democratic process.

As the leader of two organizations that have registered nearly 40,000 Pennsylvanians to vote in the last two years, I can testify that the experience of the communities we center as it relates to getting registered to vote and actually casting their ballot is an uphill battle. Statistically speaking, almost 70% of those we have registered to vote are under the age of 36, and nearly 68% of those who self-identified, have identified themselves as belonging to a community of color in the Commonwealth.

According to the PA Department of State statistics, nearly 2.1 million Pennsylvanians who are eligible to vote are unregistered, or have been inactive for so long, they are at risk for being dropped from the voter rolls. This is an institutional problem, and a crisis of democracy that we can help solve with good governance and lawmaking.

The New Pennsylvania Project was named in homage to the New Georgia Project and the incredible work of founders Nse Ufot and the incomparable Stacey Abrams. The New Georgia Project has registered tens of thousands of Georgia residents to vote since their creation, more than a decade ago. Today, Georgia enjoys 95% voter registration rates and increased voter participation. Georgia also happens to have early voting on machines.

Before moving back to Pennsylvania in 2017 after spending several years in North Carolina working in sports television production as a TV producer and director for HBCU sports at ESPNU and other networks, and then also working on a political campaign in Charlotte, I was pleased to witness the ease and length of time in which North Carolinans could cast their ballots and participate in the democratic process. In 2016, I joined the late John Lewis in my West Charlotte campaign office to help turn out the early vote and encourage same day voter registration – both policies that have expanded voting rights in the southern state. Spending time with one of my heroes is an experience that I'll never forget. There was a candy store next to our campaign office and I admittedly walked a few paces behind him to say I marched with the civil rights icon, if only to the candy store. He had a sweet tooth that day.

Pennsylvania can enjoy the same privileges as North Carolina and Georgia, two states I would have never considered to be progressive bastions of voting rights, historically.

The birthplace of American democracy should be.

The organizations I lead have overcome the barriers and obstacles before them, and carried out tremendous work in engaging and registering our fellow Pennsylvanians to vote – and actually exercising the franchise. Both statewide organizations have registered our fellow Pennsylvanians in urban, suburban, exurban and rural PA. In addition to all the counties we carry out our duties, we're also expanding into Erie, Centre and Lackawanna counties in just a few short weeks.

I'll conclude my testimony this morning with this anecdotal experience of two staff members in 2022. In addition to all the younger folks, new Americans and communities of color we've registered in our young history, we've also registered two 100 year-old women to vote. One was still driving, still shopping, as we approached her outside a grocery store, pushing her shopping cart in the Philadelphia suburbs. When asked why she had previously never registered or voted, she declared no one ever asked her. She is not alone in this thought or experience. Pennsylvania can make the voting experience more accessible. As the federal government and the federal high court have gutted voting rights, state leaders in PA can ensure our rights are protected and expanded. In our experience, that's what folks are electing you to do.

Pennsylvania should expand our access to the ballot and institute same day voter registration and true, in person, early voting on machines. PA should pass a voting rights act of our own, as Minnesota just signed into law last week, and so should our federal government. The John Lewis Advancement Act would be an incredible start, and so would a K. Leroy Irvis Voting Rights Act in the Commonwealth.

Thank you for your time and attention, and for extending me the opportunity to address this body, and speak on behalf of the tens of thousands we center and service in the Commonwealth. Give us the ballot!

Kadida Kenner, CEO
New Pennsylvania Project
New PA Project Education Fund

Testimony of Amy Widestrom, PhD, Executive Director, League of Women Voters of Pennsylvania Before the House Democratic Policy Committee on the Importance of Protecting Voting Rights and Access to the Ballot in Pennsylvania, May 22, 2024

Chairperson Bizzaro, Vice-Chairperson Issacson, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today on the critical issue of voting rights and access to the ballot in Pennsylvania. As the Executive Director of the League of Women Voters of Pennsylvania, a nonpartisan organization dedicated to empowering voters, to defending democracy, and to the promotion and protection of democratic principles, I am honored to share our perspective on key voting rights legislation under consideration and why robust voting rights legislation is essential for a healthy democracy.

Voting is the cornerstone of our democratic system. It is not just a right but a fundamental mechanism through which citizens express their preferences, hold their leaders accountable, and ensure that their voices are heard. However, the right to vote is only meaningful if it is accessible to all who are eligible. This principle is under threat, both nationally and here in Pennsylvania.

In recent years, we have witnessed an alarming trend of efforts aimed at restricting access to the ballot. These efforts disproportionately affect marginalized communities, including people of color, low-income individuals, and the elderly. This is why the passage of protective legislation at both the federal and state levels is crucial.

The League supports the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act because of the critical need for federal action to protect voting rights, at a time when there are efforts to make voting harder to access. Named after the late civil rights activist John Lewis, this act seeks to restore and strengthen the protections of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which was severely weakened by the Supreme Court's 2013 decision in *Shelby County v. Holder*. Since the *Shelby County* decision, at least 29 states have passed 94 laws that make it harder to vote, with the burden falling hardest on Black voters and other voters of color. The John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act would be an essential safeguard to prevent discriminatory practices before they can affect voters.

The League of Women Voters of Pennsylvania strongly supports measures that aim to make voting more accessible and convenient for all eligible voters, and as such we are monitoring proposals that could lead to disenfranchising eligible voters and we are following proposals that would update and modernize our elections. I will highlight some areas for improvement and legislation that should be adopted at the state level to promote and protect voting rights in the Commonwealth.

Simplifying the process for obtaining and submitting mail-in or absentee ballots and expanding early voting periods could reduce the barriers many voters face on Election Day. Access to mail-in and absentee ballots is vital for the ability of citizens to exercise their right to vote. At the League, we support no-excuse mail-in voting and expanding the use of ballot drop-boxes. Eight states and the District of Columbia conduct their elections entirely by mail with no significant instances of fraud or security concerns, and 28 states (including Pennsylvania) allow no-excuse

mail in voting, again with no significant problems. We need to strengthen and protect mail-in voting to expand access to the ballot for all Pennsylvanians.

Additionally, the League supports in-person early voting. Pennsylvania currently allows for early voting in the form of “Absentee in-person” voting. Voting Absentee in-person essentially means completing the entire mail-in voting process on the spot. But, access to this option varies by county.

Pennsylvania should establish a formal extended early voting period statewide that would allow voters to cast their ballots at designated locations during a two-week voting period prior to Election Day. Twenty-two states already allow in-person early voting, including our neighbors, New Jersey, New York, Delaware, West Virginia, and Maryland, and 8 mail-in only states allow for early mail-in voting. An early voting period will alleviate long lines and reduce Election Day pressures, making it easier for all citizens to exercise their right to vote, especially those with restrictive work schedules or demanding family obligations.

Legislation that promotes these practices is important for ensuring that all Pennsylvanians can participate in the electoral process. Early voting offers flexibility for those with demanding schedules, and mail-in ballots provide a safe and secure way to vote from the convenience of one’s home.

One of the critical areas requiring reform, and related to mail-in voting, is the pre-canvassing of mail-in ballots. Allowing counties to open and verify mail-in ballots before Election Day ensures timely and accurate results, reducing delays and errors. This early processing can also identify issues with ballots, giving voters a chance to correct technical errors that might otherwise disqualify their votes, when counties allow for notice-and-cure.

House Bill 847 (HB847) addresses this by permitting election officials to start pre-canvassing mail-in ballots up to seven days before Election Day. Currently, this process can't begin until 7:00 am on Election Day. This change would greatly enhance election efficiency in Pennsylvania, ensuring prompt and accurate vote counting, and fostering public trust by minimizing post-election delays.

In an effort to broaden participation and make the electorate more reflective of all citizens in the Commonwealth, implementing Same Day Voter Registration would allow eligible citizens to register to vote on Election Day. This reform can significantly increase voter participation, especially among young people and those who may have recently moved or move frequently because of housing insecurity. By making the registration process more accessible, we can ensure that every eligible citizen who wants to vote can do so without unnecessary barriers.

This would ensure that no eligible voter is turned away due to missed registration deadlines. Technology has changed the landscape of election administration and allowing Same Day Voter Registration would bring the Commonwealth in line with the 22 states and Washington, D.C., that already do this. This measure is particularly important for increasing voter turnout among historically underrepresented groups.

Finally, enacting strict penalties for voter intimidation and suppression is necessary to safeguard the integrity of our elections. Legislation should clearly define and prohibit these practices, ensuring that all voters can cast their ballots without fear, and provide for consequences in the case of voter intimidation and suppression. This includes measures to protect against misinformation, physical intimidation at polling places, and unfair challenges to voter eligibility.

Both federal and Pennsylvania state laws currently prohibit voter intimidation. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 and other federal statutes criminalize various forms of voter intimidation and coercion. Pennsylvania's Election Code also contains provisions against voter intimidation. The House Judiciary Committee recently approved Representative Kinsey's bill, HB461, which would further bolster these protections. This bill enhances the penalties for voter intimidation, ensuring that those who attempt to interfere with the voting process can be held accountable and face significant consequences. By strengthening these penalties, we send a clear message that voter intimidation will not be tolerated and that every voter has the right to cast their ballot free from fear and harassment.

Conversely, we oppose any legislation that seeks to impose unnecessary restrictions on voting. Proposals that add onerous ID requirements, limit the availability of mail-in ballots, or reduce the number of polling places (including ballot drop boxes), particularly in underserved areas, must be scrutinized for their potential to disenfranchise voters. Such measures often disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, creating barriers that undermine the democratic process.

The importance of protecting voting rights cannot be overstated. When citizens are unable to vote, their ability to influence government policies and decisions is diminished, leading to institutions and policies that do not fully represent the will of the people. In a state as diverse as Pennsylvania, it is imperative that our electoral system is inclusive and accessible to all eligible voters.

In conclusion, I urge this committee to support and advance legislation that protects and expands voting rights in Pennsylvania. By doing so, we protect the right to vote in the Commonwealth, and we honor the legacy of individuals, like John Lewis, who dedicated their lives to the fight for civil rights and ensure that our democracy remains vibrant and robust. Let us work together to create an electoral system that is fair, just, and accessible to all.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Amy Widestrom, PhD
Executive Director
League of Women Voters of Pennsylvania



Remarks from Salewa Ogunmefun, Executive Director, Pennsylvania Voice
House State Government Committee
May 22, 2024

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I would like to thank the House Democratic Policy Committee for hosting this informational hearing and for the opportunity to speak on behalf of Pennsylvania Voice, as well as the invitation for several of our partner organizations, who specialize in voter engagement, Make The Road PA, New Pennsylvania Project Education Fund, and League of Women Voters PA, to take part in this discussion today.

My name is Salewa Ogunmefun and I am the Executive Director of Pennsylvania Voice; a partnership of nearly 60 non-partisan organizations that are dedicated to increasing participation in our democracy, making it easier to vote, and that every single person has the opportunity to participate in a truly multiracial democracy. Today, I am here to talk about two policies that would strengthen our democracy by ensuring our freedom to vote. Same Day Voter Registration which allows for a voter to register when they are the most engaged, and two weeks of in person early voting at County based voting centers.

I'm an immigrant from Lagos, Nigeria; and a proud voter from North Philadelphia. I purchased my first home in 2020 and I have voted in 4 general elections at that address since then - each time I have needed to vote at a different polling location, so I can speak from direct experience how these commonsense fixes would benefit PA voters.

In 2020, I was assigned to vote at a prior address polling location.

In 2021, I voted at a charter school.

In 2022, I voted at a senior home up the street.

In 2023, I voted at my neighborhood elementary school.

Voters deserve to be able to vote in the most convenient way possible. With SD and EV in place, I would have been able to update my voter registration in real time in 2020, allowing me to vote at polling location that belonged to my address, and election administrators to update that information in real time. With Early Vote Centers, I would have been able to rely on voting at the same location every year.

These reforms will make it more convenient for people to vote, increase voter participation; ease the burden on election directors, and allow for results to be tabulated more quickly.

DEMOCRACY REQUIRES FULL PARTICIPATION & REPRESENTATION



Enabling voters to cast their ballots early, at their familiar polling places, with the same process they are used to using on election day is an important step towards ensuring that our elected officials truly reflect the will of the people they represent. Many of these voters have been voting the same way for years and may worry that their mail ballot won't be counted because they made a technical error. This improvement will make it easier for working parents, those serving as caregivers to loved ones, senior citizens, and those who require a wheelchair or walker to cast their ballot.

Instituting same-day voter registration at polling locations will also allow election officials to make real-time corrections to inaccurate voter rolls, further enhancing the security of our election system. More than 20 states, red and blue alike, allow residents who are eligible to vote to register and cast a ballot on Election Day. This isn't about partisan politics; it's about the strength of our democracy and ensuring our voting freedom.

Pennsylvania is the birthplace of American democracy, but a recent study by the Election Law Journal that quantified ease of access to the ballot box in all 50 states ranked Pennsylvania 32nd, between Florida and Louisiana, two states that had to preclear any changes to their election laws under the Voting Rights Act because of their history of restricting voters of color from participating in elections. That isn't the kind of company that we as a Commonwealth want to be keeping when it comes to exercising our right to vote.

Act 77, which drastically expanded vote by mail options, was an important step towards creating a democracy that is truly reflective of the will of the people, but we need to continue the trend to ensure our voting freedom. Same Day Voter Registration and Early Voting legislation represents a monumental step towards further bolstering democracy in the place where it was first conceived, and I along with thousands of others across Pennsylvania, look forward to working with you and the rest of your colleagues to pass it into law.



Hon. Ryan Bizzaro, Chairman
House Democratic Policy Committee
P.O. Box 202003
Harrisburg, PA 17120-2003

Dear Chairman Bizzarro and members of the House Democratic Policy Committee,

Counties are appreciative of the attention the General Assembly has given to the important issue of elections and voting in recent years. As you are aware, Pennsylvania's 67 counties have a significant responsibility in assuring elections remain fair, secure and accessible at every step of the process. Over the past several years, counties have worked closely with the General Assembly on significant changes to the Pennsylvania Election Code, including the implementation of mail-in ballots under Act 77 of 2019. Despite numerous challenges, counties have done a tremendous job running successful, fair and accurate elections, and since 2020, counties have learned a great deal from their experiences. However, we also know there are ways in which changes to Pennsylvania's election laws can improve counties' ability to administer elections, as well as their ability to provide more efficient results.

Certainly, there are many areas of Act 77 that need clarification by the General Assembly and administration to help counties fulfill their responsibilities in election administration and improve to voter experience. To that end, we urge the legislature to work together with counties to address needed changes to Act 77, and indeed to the Election Code as a whole, before making any other substantial and fundamental changes to the existing law. Whether significant changes to election law are considered by Congress or the General Assembly, it is the preference of counties that any significant changes that may be proposed not be implemented until Pennsylvania has had the opportunity to modernize and make much-needed updates to the current Election Code. Furthermore, any efforts by either Congress and the General Assembly must ensure election officials have the resources necessary to properly administer elections and address the challenges of a changing landscape.

Counties urge the General Assembly to bring counties to the table to discuss and provide feedback on any elections-related legislation so that we may work together to accomplish meaningful reforms well ahead of major elections. Waiting until just before an election to adopt most reforms into law will not provide enough time for counties to successfully prepare, train staff and implement new procedures prior to the November election, which is good for neither counties nor voters. Counties have valuable experience to provide in the development of legislation to assure we can continue to administer elections that are secure and accurate, and

that provide accessibility to our voters so that all have an opportunity to engage in the democratic process.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide these remarks and we look forward to working with you on legislative changes to improve the administration of elections in Pennsylvania both for counties and for voters.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lisa M. Schaefer". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'L' and 'S'.

Lisa Schaefer
Executive Director
County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania



May 21, 2024

The Honorable Ryan Bizzaro, Chairman
House Majority Policy Committee
Pennsylvania House of Representatives
116 Main Capitol Building, P O Box 202003
Harrisburg, PA 17120-2003

RE: Voting Rights and Access Public Hearing

Dear Chairman Bizzaro and Members of the Committee,

Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. is a sorority of college educated women who are committed to public service, especially in the Black community. Through local and global communities, the sorority provides support and assistance to improve political, educational, social, and economic conditions. The sorority's first public act of service was participation in the Women's Suffrage. Our members are committed to protect voter rights and access.

Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated commends the Pennsylvania House of Representatives for this public hearing on Voting Rights and Access and for providing us with an opportunity to voice our concerns. The expansion of voting access provides an opportunity for all citizens to participate in the election process. Voting rights legislation provides protection to our democracy by ensuring fair elections, unfettered access to the ballot box, ending gerrymandering in redistricting processes, and giving Pennsylvanians the tools to address discriminatory election practices. With over 350,000 initiated members and over 1,000 chapters worldwide, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. stands with prominent human and civil rights organizations to call on our elected officials to act on measures to provide access and deny disenfranchisement. Many citizens across this Commonwealth still face challenges to participate in the election process due to health, age, race, and gender. Voting is a fundamental and sacred right and responsibility of American citizenship.

We support expansions to voting versus voter suppression. Access to the ballot box, strengthening ethic rules for public servants, and implementation of other anti-corruption measures fortify our democracy and adds protection for people of color who have faced adversity in the voting process. Other supported measures include: extended registration deadlines, expanded polling locations, protection for in-person voting, pre-canvassing to

prevent confusion and protect against unfounded claims of fraud or conspiracy theories, and any other unnecessary barrier or manipulative tactic to promote a desired outcome in elections. These are just a few measures necessary to expand our election process here in Pennsylvania.

We do not support voter suppression efforts to include Voter ID. Criminalization and arbitrary requirements with harsh penalties discourages voter participation and are used to invoke fear to suppress voices in the democratic process. Other voter suppression efforts include poll taxation, literacy testing, shorter mail-in ballot time spans, fewer polling sites in larger minority populations, expansion of residency requirements which opens the door for intimidation and harassment at the polls, and mass purges of voter records are all measures to disenfranchise voters not only in this Commonwealth, but nationwide.

For the reasons stated above, we request the committee and elected officials not to advance any voter suppression legislation and to protect voter rights and access in Pennsylvania. We look forward to building a democracy that is inclusive to all citizens across this Commonwealth.

Sincerely,

Deborah R. Brady

Deborah R. Brady, Coordinator
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