



Representative Robert DeLeo
Speaker of the Massachusetts House of Representatives

Senator Karen Spilka
President of the Massachusetts State Senate

Dear Speaker DeLeo, President Spilka, and members of the General Court,

We are writing to you to urge you to swiftly adopt legislation to prepare for the threats that COVID-19 poses to our fall elections. This crisis threatens both public health and our democracy, by keeping voters at home, suppressing registration efforts, and imperiling the health of poll workers. Although we hope that the pandemic will have abated by the fall and that the virus does not resurge, there is no guarantee that this will be the case, and we must take action now to ensure that the fall elections are as safe and participatory as possible. Even if the immediate crisis has passed by then, many Massachusetts voters, especially the immunocompromised or otherwise at-risk, will still be fearful of public interaction -- and this is the *best* case scenario.

The emergency legislation you passed last month to protect the spring elections (S.2608) was a strong first step. We urge you to take action now to protect our fall elections as well. Although the state primaries are five months and general elections seven months away, it will take at least that long to implement the necessary reforms, prepare our election officials and polling places for these changes, purchase new equipment, and educate voters. This cannot wait until we know for certain what health and social restrictions will be in place in the fall; it will be too late to adapt if we do so.

We urge you to support the following reforms to ensure that all eligible voters can participate in our fall elections while protecting public health in the Commonwealth. Please note that these are all reforms that have been implemented successfully elsewhere and are widely viewed as best case practices even before the pandemic.

Expanded absentee and vote by mail:

The legislature must ensure that all eligible voters can participate in our fall elections from the safety of their own homes. S. 2608 took an important step for the spring elections by allowing all eligible voters taking precautions due to COVID-19 to qualify for absentee ballots. We urge you to implement a similar but even more expansive reform for our September state primaries and the November general elections and address several other related issues and believe that mailing

a ballot to every voter would be the most efficient and effective way of delivering ballots to voters.

In addition, deadlines for the receipt of ballots need to be extended, both to ensure early access to ballots and to ensure that delayed mail does not result in disenfranchisement. Many states are moving to allow ballots to be counted if they are postmarked by Election Day, rather than received by that time. This may not be practicable for the primary because of tight printing deadlines, but it can be easily applied to the general election in November.

Second, with a projected one million more ballots being cast by mail, it will be impossible to ship them all to polling places for processing on Election Day. Clerks will need authority for central tabulation and ideally for tabulating in advance, during the early voting window.

Third, additional funding will be needed for additional equipment, such as high speed scanners. Federal funds that have already been appropriated can pay for this. We also urge you to appropriate money to cover the full cost of mailing ballots to voters and providing postage pre-paid return envelopes. Many people have limited or no access to stamps at this juncture and it is critical that they too be able to cast a ballot. What's more, sending ballots centrally will greatly reduce pressure on city and town clerks and is the most efficient method of expanding vote by mail. Ballots will still need to be returned locally. There is an [8.2 million dollar federal grant available](#) for this purpose but currently it must be leveraged by a \$1.6 million state appropriation. Our national organizations are working to remove this 20% match requirement and to get even more money for the states to use for election changes made as an emergency response to COVID-19. Our Congressional delegation is also working hard to provide additional money for this purpose.

Of course, absentee ballots must be available in all languages required by law, including those covered by session laws or Chapter 166 for voting in the City of Boston.

Protections for In-Person Voting and Poll Workers

Mail-in balloting will help keep our elections safe and participatory, but voters must still have the option of casting ballots in person. Sometimes mail fails and voters do not receive their ballots. Sometimes a voter may have spoiled their ballot and need a new one. Voters with disabilities may be unable to mark a paper ballot and need to access the proper, specialized, voting equipment that is available only at polling places. Depending on what kind of vote by mail options are provided, voting in person could be moved to voter centers, saving money and limiting contact between voters and election workers.

Regardless of where in-person voting takes place, strong protections must be enacted to ensure that voters who prefer to vote in person – or who do not receive a mail ballot or have errors in their registration – can do so without risking their or the greater public's health. These protections would include expanding early voting hours and the early voting period to reduce the concentration of voters at any one time and ensuring that polling places practice social distancing

(lines with voters spread at least six feet apart, and ample supply of hand sanitizer, disinfectant wipes, and face masks for poll workers).

Voter Registration

During the crisis and well after, voter registration efforts will be severely curtailed. Far fewer voters will register at the RMV, and third-party registration efforts at events or door-to-door efforts will be dramatically reduced. Even if the crisis abates by summer and stay-at-home advisories are lifted, we suspect that many eligible voters will avoid close interactions with strangers like approaching a voter registration table.

Moreover, the crisis has disrupted voters' lives and will continue to do so. For many eligible and registered voters, especially those who move before the fall elections, updating voter registration records to reflect their new addresses will likely fall at the bottom of their priority list.

We urge you to build on the precedent set by S.2608, which cut the voter registration deadline from 20 days to 10 days, by eliminating the deadline entirely and implementing Election Day Voter Registration (EDR) for Massachusetts' fall primaries and the general election. EDR is working well in 21 other states and is an important failsafe to help all eligible voters participate.

Thank you for taking early steps to protect public health and the democratic process this Spring. We hope you will act swiftly and with great urgency to safeguard our fall elections as well.

Sincerely,

Pam Wilmot, Common Cause Massachusetts

Rahsaan Hall, ACLU of Massachusetts

Janet Domenitz, MASSPIRG,

Cheryl Clyburn Crawford, MassVOTE

Beth Huang, Massachusetts Voter Table

Jonathan Cohn, Progressive Massachusetts

Patricia Comfort, League of Women Voters of Massachusetts

Sophia Hall, Lawyers for Civil Rights

Eva A. Millona, MIRA Coalition

Frances Moore Lappé, Small Planet Institute

Horace Small, Union of Minority Neighborhoods

Russell Freedman, Progressive Democrats of America

Jacob Stern, Massachusetts Sierra Club

Anabel Santiago, Coalition for Social Justice

Adam Eichen, Equal Citizen

Cheryl Clyburn Crawford, Black Directors Network
Rebekah Gewirtz, National Association of Social Workers – MA Chapter
Rev. Vernon Walker, Young Democrats of Massachusetts
Cindy Rowe, Jewish Alliance for Law and Social Action
Cole Harrison, Massachusetts Peace Action
Georgia Katsoulomitis, Massachusetts Law Reform Institute
Isabel Gonzalez-Webster, Worcester Interfaith
Jeanne Kempthorne and John Lippitt, Progressive Democrats of Massachusetts
Zac Bears, PHENOM
Shaun Kennedy, Jetpac
Tom Callahan, Massachusetts Affordable Housing Alliance
Lisa Danetz, ForwardMA
Beth Kontos, American Federation of Teachers – Massachusetts
Elena Letona, Neighbor to Neighbor Massachusetts
Fed Wulkan, Franklin County Continuing the Political Revolution
Vick Mohanka, Clean Water Action
Matt Miller, Act on Mass
Grace Johnson, MIT Graduate Student Council
Seamus Lombardo, MITvote
Cara McCormick, Voter Choice for Massachusetts
Peter Ciurczak, Cambridge Area Stronger Together (CAST)
Deb Paul, Indivisible MA
Michael Kane, Mass Alliance of HUD Tenants
Janine Carriero and Lew Finfer, Massachusetts Communities Action Network (MCAN)
Joyce Hackett, Lift+Every+Vote
Louis A. Elisa, Garrison Trotter Neighborhood Association
Gillian Mason, Massachusetts Jobs with Justice
Michael Chen, Boston Sunrise Movement
Arielle Jennings, Generation Citizen Massachusetts
Evan George, Boston Democratic Socialists of America