

April 13, 2020

To: Wisconsin Election Commission and other Interested Parties
From: the undersigned Voting Rights, Civil Rights, and Advocacy Groups

MADISON – On Tuesday, April 7, Wisconsin was the first state to hold a statewide election during a global pandemic and under a stay-at-home order issued by its governor.

Voting rights advocacy groups heard from more than 600 voters who were forced to navigate challenges and barriers to casting their votes on Tuesday.

These stories contain similar threads and are spread across the entire state, including but not limited to, Waukesha, Green Bay, Milwaukee, Oshkosh, Madison, New Berlin, Oconto Falls, Appleton, Sister Bay, Madison, Mequon, and Omro.

Voters experienced staggering, and dangerous, challenges that include attempts to vote in-person and requesting absentee ballots.

On election day, voters faced numerous hardships at polling locations. Many voters experienced long lines caused by a reduction in polling locations, and unsafe conditions at polling sites due to a lack of appropriate precautionary measures.

Additionally, tens of thousands of voters who requested absentee ballots were forced to risk their health and safety – and the health and safety of everyone – to go vote or to follow the Governor’s “Safer at Home” order because the ballots they requested never came.

Voters also expressed challenges using the existing technology required to request an absentee ballot including reports of receiving damaged ballots, and not receiving proper envelopes to mail their ballots back with.

Below are several examples from voters and poll workers:

- *I didn't receive my absentee ballots after two requests. – Oshkosh, WI*
- *My mother in law, 84, was not able to figure out how to download her ID to get her ballot, because of Safer at Home, I was not able to help her. – New Berlin*

Other individuals expressed concern about the changing guidance from the Wisconsin Election Commission on the requirement for a witness on the absentee ballot.

- *After the court ruled witness signature wasn't necessary I dropped my ballot off at the drop box. After I dropped it off, the ruling was reversed. Tried to contact the city of Kenosha clerk but got no response. Now my vote will not be counted because of missing witness signature and through no fault of my own. – Kenosha*

In addition to having concerns about absentee ballots, voters and poll workers expressed concerns about election day itself.

- *The line was very long. My disabled husband could not stand for the 3 hour wait. – Green Bay*
- *Over a two-hour wait with no bathroom access, no hand sanitizer access, half of the people weren't wearing masks in line. Social distancing was not followed well. – Milwaukee*

Weeks before the election, a collective of voting rights organizations voiced their concern with holding an election during a pandemic. The consensus was that state lawmakers needed to implement several recommendations. Decisionmakers refused to make accommodations or recognize the challenges and burdens being placed on individuals because of COVID19.

Wisconsin has multiple elections scheduled for 2020 and it is imperative that our elected representatives act now to put in place election processes that will ensure all voters can be safe while exercising their constitutionally guaranteed voting rights. Those organizations are asking the following:

- Mail a ballot to all registered voters automatically before each election, ideally 30 days before the election date. Voters should not be required to have a witness or provide proof of an ID to request or return their ballot.
- Allow voters to return ballots multiple ways: through the mail, the use of secure drop boxes, and by dropping off at polling locations on the day of the election.
- Every municipality should have a minimum number of polling locations within their community based on the size of the population, located in areas that can serve all populations in the municipality and allow voters to register and vote quickly and efficiently if they choose to vote in person on election day.
- Every municipality should offer in-person access to early voting and voter registration, as well as ballot drop boxes for several weeks before Election Day.

- Voter registration should be as easy as possible through automatic voter registration in schools or at the DMV. Voters should also be able to register in person on Election Day and during early voting periods.
- All voters should remain on the voter rolls unless there is an action by the voter or through government records (such as death records) that would indicate they are no longer eligible to vote. Wisconsin should not use passive efforts to remove voters such as through returned postcards or past voting history, which are notoriously unreliable and unfair.
- The government should fund public education efforts to ensure that all citizens are aware of how our voting process works and how they can participate.
- For citizens for whom English is a second language they should have access to language assistance for voting. This should include access to ballots and elections materials in their native language

ACLU of Wisconsin

Black and Brown Womyn Power Coalition, Inc.

Black Lives Matter to Wisconsin Unitarian Universalists

Chippewa Valley Votes

EXPO (Ex Incarcerated People Organizing)

Layton Boulevard West Neighbors (LBWN)

League of Women Voters of Wisconsin

MICAH (Milwaukee Innercity Congregations Allied for Hope)

Midwest Environmental Advocates

Milwaukee County Human Rights Commission

MIRACLE Mental Health

Milwaukee Turners

National Lawyers Guild, Milwaukee Chapter

9to5, National Association of Working Women - WI

Parents for Public Schools - MKE

Progressive Baptist Church

Represent Us Wisconsin

Schools and Communities United

SOPHIA

Souls to the Polls

Voces de la Frontera

Wisconsin Voices

WAVE Educational Fund

WISDOM

Wisconsin Conservation Voices

Wisconsin Alliance for Excellent Schools (WAES)

Wisconsin Alliance for Women's Health

Wisconsin Democracy Campaign