



**TESTIMONY BY JAY YOUNG
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, COMMON CAUSE ILLINOIS and
CHAIR OF THE JUST DEMOCRACY COALITION**

APRIL 17, 2020

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I am Jay Young, Executive Director of Common Cause Illinois, a nonpartisan nonprofit with more than 30,000 members across Illinois. I am here on behalf of the Just Democracy Illinois coalition, which I chair. Just Democracy is a broad-based non-partisan coalition of community groups striving to protect and promote the value of every vote, no matter the geographic, racial, ethnic, or party affiliation of the voter. Our steering committee is comprised of Illinois PIRG, Asian American Advancing Justice, Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, CHANGE Illinois, Chicago Votes, Chicago Lawyers' Committee, and Common Cause.

In this time of crisis, our coalition has committed itself to working to ensure that every eligible voter who wants to vote in November can vote, in as safe a manner possible. It will take a coordinated effort to achieve this goal, and we intend to work closely with our state and local election officials, decision makers, coalition partners and community members. We've already had conversations with local election authorities, folks like Noah Praetz and others who are looking at this from a state and national level.

Just Democracy Illinois will always be here to help and serve as a resource. I have been informed by my attorneys that they have initiated discussions with the Attorney General's office again regarding automatic voter registration. I am hoping that we will all be able to collaborate on that as well, especially during this difficult time.

As evidenced by recent elections here in Illinois, in Wisconsin, and in several other states across the country, the coronavirus pandemic has had a profound effect on our electoral processes. It has upended traditional voting patterns and has generated incalculable stress on our election infrastructure, from the election officials who are grappling with the question of how to hold fair elections during an unprecedented pandemic, to the staff, poll workers and

volunteers who are putting themselves on the front lines to ensure our democratic processes continue. Not to mention the voters themselves, who as we've seen have braved threats to their safety to exercise their right to vote.

The position of our coalition is clear: no voter should be forced to risk their life to exercise that right.

To protect that right to vote and to ensure maximum participation in the November election, we believe that state and local officials must begin now to prepare for what is sure to be a historic election in the fall. There will be time afterwards to dissect our response and to build upon what we have learned for future elections.

We believe that the most responsible way forward is a combination of in-person voting as well as expanded access to the current no-excuse absentee voting framework.

Vote by Mail Expansion

With respect to voting by mail, every eligible voter that wishes to request a ballot to vote by mail should have ample opportunity to do so. That means embarking on a robust public education campaign to apprise voters of their right to vote by mail. In addition, the State should utilize and promote a universal online ballot request form and provide each voter with the capacity to track their ballot online.

While we do believe that every voter that wishes to vote by mail should be able to request a ballot, our coalition is not ready to take the position that election officials should mail every registered voter a ballot, due to concerns about racial equity, logistics and the need to protect underrepresented communities.

Given the variation across election authorities, attention will need to be paid to things like processing, an equitable and community-informed signature verification and cure process, a secure and robust drop box system, party monitoring, etc.

Timelines are also critically important, as we've seen in Wisconsin. Given current issues and uncertainty with the United States Postal Service, election authorities must extend the time period for completed ballots to be received by election authorities.

Finally, particular attention should be paid to providing hospitalized, homebound, and quarantined voters access to an emergency ballot - to waive the physician signature requirement when appropriate, to allow election personnel to deliver the ballot and associated forms, and to recruit and deploy trained personnel who could help bridge this gap for voters who suddenly find themselves without access. The current Illinois laws fall far short of providing voter access to those who are most vulnerable in the pandemic.

Safe In-Person Voting Before and On Election Day

While Illinois will undoubtedly see a surge in absentee voting, given the stakes in the November election, it should also expect substantial in-person as voting as well -- a fact that is complicated by the anticipated resurgence of a coronavirus outbreak in the fall. It may be tempting to substantially shrink the Election Day footprint in light of an anticipated increase in absentee voting, but non-discrimination and racial equity standards must be set before polling places are closed, and no polling place should be shuttered without an opportunity for the community to voice their concerns. Closing polling places, consolidating polling places, or tolerating polling places that lack sufficient election judges or supplies are major decisions that will affect community members' ability to have a voice in 2020. Importantly, despite the state's emergency footing, no restrictions on voter access should be made permanent in Chicago or Illinois, including any polling place closures. Temporary, emergency measures should not result in permanent obstacles to voting.

To strengthen protections and increase efficiency at polling places, the advocacy community and election authorities must immediately develop a robust program to recruit younger election judges. All election judges should receive adequate personal protection equipment, and all polling places should be stocked with the appropriate sanitary equipment. And of course, best practices for in-person voting while social distancing must be developed and implemented in accordance with appropriate public health guidelines. All of this should be done with as much training, communication, and Election Day guidance as possible to avoid the confusion and frustration we saw in the state's primary election.

On a final note, we would like to discuss the importance of federal funding as we deliberate reforms. We are committed to working with our elected officials and other stakeholders to

advocate for as large of a share of available federal funding as Illinois is eligible to receive, including HAVA funds, CARES funds and the anticipated stimulus package.

Making changes to election administration is challenging in normal times, and poses risks including disenfranchising voters and lowering public confidence in our elections. The details matter. The timing of these reforms matter. And core principles of core principles of community involvement, racial equity and social justice matter. We can protect voters' health, maximize their participation, and safeguard their vote by working together, in a timely fashion, to implement necessary reforms. We welcome the opportunity to be part of the process.