



**TESTIMONY BY JAY YOUNG  
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CHAIR OF THE JUST DEMOCRACY COALITION**

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Thank you, once again, for the opportunity to participate in this important discussion. My name is Jay Young, and I have the privilege of serving as the Executive Director for the Illinois chapter of Common Cause, a national a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization founded to serve as a vehicle for citizens who want to make sure that their voices are heard in the political process. Today, however, I come before you in my capacity as the chair of the Just Democracy Illinois coalition, a statewide 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.

I was pleased to hear that, since I was last before you, counsel for our coalition and the State were able to initiate discussions around automatic voter registration. I hope that those talks will be fruitful.

I will try to keep my remarks brief, as I know that our coalition's policy platform was included in the packet of information that was provided to the Board for its consideration prior to this morning's hearing. Also, as has been discussed, we all expect to know much more about the work before us by the end of this week, when the General Assembly concludes its Special Session. In light of all of this, I want to focus my comments on a handful of issues that our coalition is worried have not been receiving sufficient attention in the planning process.

Specifically, the Just Democracy Illinois coalition firmly believes that:

- Our vote by mail system and the associated voter education effort must work for all Illinois voters and be provided in a language that they understand;
- The community must be given a reasonable opportunity to participate in any decisions to consolidate polling places; and
- Steps must be taken to simplify and streamline the process to ensure that hospitalized, homebound, and quarantined voters can access an emergency ballot.

We understand that multiple Vote by Mail proposals have been considered by the General Assembly in recent weeks; some involving sending all registered voters a ballot and others involving sending a subset of voters an application to request a ballot. While there are advocates in our coalition that support aspects of both plans, we all agree that whatever is decided, our system must be grounded in notions of racial equity and must be communicated in such a way to encourage the broadest participation possible.

Voting by mail is a great solution so voters do not have to pick between their right to vote and their personal safety amid a pandemic. But it can't be the only solution, as it doesn't work the same for every voter or every community. Black Americans are more likely to have changed their addresses recently and are the racial group that has historically been the least likely to have voted by mail in the past. For the 1 in 6 people of voting age living with a disability, voting by mail may not be ideal or accessible. And, we have a growing number of limited English proficient citizens in Illinois who have the right to get written and oral assistance with voting. Ballot referendum questions and election jargon can be confusing for all of us voters, and the barriers for citizens who are still in the process of learning English can be even greater. Language access and racial equity more generally cannot be an afterthought for the changes that are being considered for the November election, or we risk reversing all the progress we have been making in Illinois over the last several years in making access to the polls more equitable.

Turning now to matters concerning the Election Day footprint. While we understand and appreciate the needs of election authorities to realign their resources given the expected growth of voting by mail and early voting, we are alarmed that we have heard precious few discussions of the need to collect community input before closing, reducing, or consolidating any polling places, reducing availability of bilingual election judges, or reducing early voting time periods or locations. Moreover, we are hearing that local officials are considering reducing registration access or voter access in locations like nursing homes and jails. Reducing voter access for the communities who are facing the most dire public health risks will only make a bad situation worse. There must be a

process for meaningful engagement with those community members to inform any new voting processes that they will have to follow for November.

Finally, we remain concerned our state's homebound or hospitalized voters. Illinois must update processes for emergency applications for ballots so that people don't have to choose between voting and complying with public health guidance on social distancing and stay-at-home orders. Otherwise, under the current emergency procedures, access to and submission of emergency applications for ballots becomes logistically impossible for voters who find themselves having to stay at home on Election Day due to health concerns. Our impression is that an exceedingly low number of community members were able to jump through all the hoops of the emergency ballot procedure in the March primary, even though they were legally entitled to do so. Indeed, our friends at the Chicago Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights report having received an unprecedented number of calls on March 17 from voters around the state who were trying to access an emergency application for a ballot because they had no other safe way to vote.

WBEZ and other outlets have reported that our communities of color are being disproportionately affected by COVID-19 due to pre-existing racial disparities in public health. Eliminating some of the unnecessary, cumbersome steps in the emergency ballot process will help prevent individuals from experiencing the additional harm of disenfranchisement just because they do not have immediate access to a doctor, a notary, and a family member who can safely hand-deliver materials.

The solutions to these and the other problems that were highlighted in the platform document that was provided to you are within our capacity to solve with good policy and even better education. We have coalition partners like Faith for the Common Good who are planning community summits in Central Illinois. But we are living in unprecedented times, and it will take all of us working together to find just and inclusive solutions. Our leaders in Springfield must listen to the communities that they represent. A community of advocates stands ready to help you in your appointed tasks. I thank you for your time.