

The Honorable Ralph Northam  
Governor of Virginia  
P.O. Box 1475  
Richmond, VA 23218

Dear Governor Northam,

As the November election looms near, it is imperative that every Virginian is afforded the opportunity to safely exercise their fundamental right to vote. It is especially true now, as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to disproportionately impact the economic security and health of our most vulnerable Americans. To ensure a fair election, legislators must take immediate action to alleviate barriers to voter access amidst the backdrop of a global pandemic.

On behalf of the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), America's largest civil rights organization working to achieve lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) equality, and our more than three million members and supporters nationwide, we commend you and Virginia's other elected leaders for enacting laws in 2020 that strengthen participation in our democracy, and we write to urge you to ensure every eligible voter has the ability to cast their votes in the face of the pandemic. We ask that you consider and support the following recommendations for funding and expanding voting options during the August 18<sup>th</sup> special session of the General Assembly.

*1. Same-day Voter Registration*

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles was forced to temporarily close statewide DMVs, making it difficult for many voters to register to vote or obtain identification. As a result, new voter registration in 2020 has lagged behind previous election years and suggests a surge of applicants once restrictions have lifted. While we recognize Virginia's leadership to implement same-day voter registration by 2022, we urge you to consider the crucial necessity of same-day voter registration in 2020. Virginia should implement same-day registration in 2020 and remove registration deadlines before Election Day, making voting more accessible.

*2. Eliminate Witness Requirement for Absentee Ballots*

Witness requirements for absentee ballots create unnecessary burdens on voters. Those who live alone would be forced to interact with additional individuals, jeopardizing their well-being. The elimination of the witness requirement in the November election would both preserve the right to vote for all Virginians and promote public health and safety.

*3. Pre-Paid Postage for Absentee Ballots*

Requiring voters to pay for postage in order to return absentee ballots and applications amounts to an unconstitutional poll tax. Instead, election officials should deliver Virginians return envelopes with prepaid postage. This ensures that all voters, regardless of socio-economic background and access to a printer or transportation, are able to access the ballot equally.

#### *4. Improve Opportunity to Cure Ballots*

Each election cycle, hundreds of thousands of mail-in ballots are rejected and go uncounted due to a variety of alleged defects, including inconsistent signatures and tardiness. More than 5% of absentee ballots were discarded in Virginia's June Primary because of their arrival outside of the deadline, despite ongoing delays in mail delivery service and other disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>1</sup>. This fall, an unprecedented number of Virginians will be voting absentee for the first time and will inevitably make simple mistakes that should not nullify their voices. Voters must have a reasonable period of time in which they can cure defects in their ballots and minimize the potential for their disenfranchisement.

#### *5. Institute Vote Centers*

It is crucial that voters are able to maintain appropriate social distancing and avoid large gatherings while voting in-person. To this effect, Virginia should implement voting centers to provide additional locations for voters to cast their ballots and alleviate the long lines that are often present on election day. We ask that you do everything in your power to encourage the institution of vote centers across the Commonwealth.

The COVID-19 pandemic will continue to impede how we are able to participate at the ballot box. Virginia's leaders must continue working to ensure that every eligible voter has the ability to cast their votes, even in the face of the pandemic. We ask that during the August special session of the General Assembly that you support the recommendations above for funding and expanding voting options to protect the health and safety of Virginians and ensure that all voters have the opportunity to have their voices heard in a safe, secure manner.

Sincerely,

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<sup>1</sup> Pam Fessler, *Signed, Sealed, Undelivered: Thousands Of Mail-In Ballots Rejected For Tardiness*, NPR (July 13, 2020), <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/13/889751095/signed-sealed-undelivered-thousands-of-mail-in-ballots-rejected-for-tardiness>