

Testimony for Ohio State House of Representatives April 16, 2015 at 9:00 AM

My name is Archita Taylor, and I am a staff attorney with the Fair Elections Legal Network (FELN), a national, nonpartisan voting rights and election reform organization dedicated to removing barriers to registration and voting for traditionally underrepresented constituencies, and improving overall election administration. Since 2006, our organization has been involved in supporting election reform efforts and working with non-partisan organizations to remove barriers to voting and increase voter participation. As a member of the Ohio Fair Elections Network (OFEN), comprised of a number of groups and individuals invested in ensuring access to the ballot box, I submit this testimony on behalf of FELN to urge you support funding for absentee ballot application mailings in the State of Ohio. We understand that the latest version of the budget in the State House does not include funding for this provision, and we believe it is essential to provide funding for this provision.

Absentee voting was open to all Ohio voters in 2006, and since then, nearly one-third of all the state's voters have cast their ballots before Election Day. In 2012 alone, almost a quarter of total votes cast during the Presidential election were absentee mail ballots. In particular, the availability of absentee ballots is especially crucial for some voters, including the elderly, disabled, and low income voters.

Last year, the state legislature passed SB 205, a bill to prohibit local boards of elections or any government official other than the Secretary of State from sending out absentee ballot applications to all voters. Essentially, SB 205 limited absentee application mailings to be done exclusively by the Secretary of State's office and it required the legislature to appropriate funding specifically for the purposes of mailing these absentee ballots. The legislature spearheaded this change in absentee ballot application mailing rules, and it should now heed Secretary Husted's request to fund these ballots.

The legislature's change in SB 205 last year and the resulting implications of not allocating funding for absentee application mailings will leave many Ohio voters confused and possibly disenfranchised from the process altogether. Voters in this state are accustomed to automatically receiving absentee ballots at their homes. If the funding is not provided for mailing these applications, many voters may not realize until it's too late to specifically request an application that they will not have the option to vote absentee by mail. Voters who do not have access to this information may end up waiting for a mailed absentee application that never comes, and could potentially be unable to cast their ballots on Election Day. This would ultimately disenfranchise these voters who otherwise expected to vote absentee by mail. The only way to potentially circumvent this is to run a robust education campaign to notify voters they now have to request a mailed absentee application, which would come at a cost to county boards of elections. Even still, there is no guarantee that every voter will be reached and apprised of the new provisions.

To avoid confusion, provide the broadest access to the ballot, and keep Ohio at the forefront of election administration, this legislature should, without delay, approve funding for absentee ballot application mailings. Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony. I sincerely hope you will take these comments into consideration as you decide on the state's budgetary needs.

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