

WHAT CAN WE DO TODAY TO INSURE THAT ALL CITIZENS CAN SAFELY VOTE THIS NOVEMBER?

(by Bill Woods for StreetVibes)

This is an important election year. Voters will elect the President, members of Congress, and many state and local officials. The Pandemic has already impacted many state primary elections this spring, and TV news shocked viewers with pictures of the huge lines waiting for hours to vote in states such as Georgia. Many citizens are now asking the question: "What steps need to be taken to insure that people can safely cast their ballots this fall?"



Not only is this a complex question, but it has national, state, and local ramifications. Under the U.S. Constitution, each state has the authority to regulate election procedures, while states often delegate much of the management to local boards of election. For this reason, citizen organizations that operate national, state, and local chapters such as Common Cause and the League of Women Voters are particularly critical at moments like this.

To answer the opening question, especially as it relates to voting in Ohio, an interview was arranged with Catherine Turcer, the Executive Director of Common Cause Ohio, Turcer and Mia Lewis, another consultant with Common Cause, discussed a range of issues related to the upcoming election. Turcer will also address this topic in an upcoming Zoom Community Issues Forum on July 9th at 12:00 noon.

What is the most important action Ohio citizens can do right now to insure a safe and fair election process for voters this fall? Without hesitation, Turcer urged Ohioans to contact Senator Rob Portman to tell him to vote for the Heroes' Act. This legislation, passed by the House but stymied in the Senate by Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, includes funding for state election operations this November. Ohio and most other states, explained Turcer, are strapped for revenue due to the Pandemic, and they have already spent most of their normal election allocations due to the extra costs of the more complex and sometimes postponed primaries this spring. If Congress doesn't bail out the states to help them prepare for safe and effectively administered elections in November, then the long and unsafe lines of Georgia and the delayed results caused by voting by mail in other states will be a mild preview of the upcoming Presidential Election

Despite the President's rants about the fraudulent results of voting by mail, this process offers the safest way to conduct elections during a health crisis such as COVID-19. Except for states like Washington that use voting by mail as their regular process, states are accustomed to a small percentage of their citizens casting absentee ballots by mail. For this reason, states need the time and the additional funding to gear up their administrative capacities to handle the huge spike in absentee voting.

Turcer and Mia Lewis depicted some of the extra steps that the Secretary of State's Office must take to help Ohio's eighty-eight county boards of election to be effective this fall. Most of them relate to either preparing for a larger vote by mail or to making Election Day procedures safe for voters and poll workers. For instance, money is needed for machines to sort absentee ballots and the extra paper to print the ballots. Many local boards also must recruit younger poll workers to replace older retirees, and updated training constitutes another need. Turcer and Lewis further stressed that an election during a pandemic also requires a sufficient supply of personal protective equipment at each polling place.

The second immediate action recommended by Turcer is to go on-line and request an absentee ballot. Rather than making last minute decisions that can lead to delays and other snafus, an early request gets one immediately on record, and it will indicate to the Secretary of State and other election officials that absentee voting will be a major factor this fall. Early requests will also expose any existing problems in the process. The first step is to go on-line to the Secretary of State's Web-site, and after finding the right option and application form, the applicant must be able to provide the current voting address and match their signature currently on file. Because Ohio has a voter-ID law, noted Turcer, applicants must also be able to provide their Ohio driver's license number or the number from another valid Ohio-ID.

Reference to Ohio's ID-Law, triggered a discussion of any further obstacles that the Republican controlled Ohio General Assembly might pass before the fall election. Turcer noted that House Bill 180 had included several negative voting restrictions, but this Proposal appears at this juncture to be either dead or on hold. The House could reconvene in July, and Common Cause and the League of Women Voters will be ready to oppose and keep the public informed about any voter suppression proposals. Turcer, however, is optimistic that this possibility is unlikely so close to a major election.



One negative factor was left not fully answered. Voting registration numbers due to the pandemic are low nationally and in Ohio. Usually this is a very busy time for groups like the League and the NAACP to conduct grassroots registration campaigns. Due to COVID-19 and the need for social distancing, very limited face to face on the street registration efforts are occurring. Turcer and Lewis concluded that some immediate, creative planning for how to do voter registration during a pandemic must take place.