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Voter Advocates Urge Legislature to Either Fund Absentee Mailing or Repeal Prohibition on Official Mailings

Voting rights organizations reacted with frustration today because the newest version of the budget bill did not include a \$1.25 million amendment to support a statewide absentee application ballot mailing in 2016. "There is absolutely no reason that this modest request was not among the amendments that made it into the substitute budget bill," said Carrie Davis, Executive Director of the League of Women Voters of Ohio. "If the legislature refuses to fund the Secretary of State's absentee mailing next year, then they ought to repeal the prohibition on the Secretary of State or other government offices sending absentee applications on their own."

In a state where elections issues are often contentious, the mailing won broad support early on from both advocates and elections officials, including the Ohio Secretary of State, Ohio Association of Election Officials, the League of Women Voters of Ohio, Common Cause of Ohio, Miami Valley Voter Protection Coalition, ProgressOhio and the Coalition on Homelessness in Housing in Ohio.

"We are grateful to the Secretary of State for his leadership on this issue," said Catherine Turcer of Common Cause Ohio. "We agree that funding this measure would help all eligible voters with the convenience of voting from home, while ensuring a smoother Election Day."

"This is the latest effort to make it more difficult for people to vote," said ProgressOhio Executive Director Sandy Theis. "No one testified in opposition to this and there is no good reason not to fund this important mailing. But there are lots of bad reasons."

Vote by mail has become increasingly popular among Ohio voters. As offered in March by a representative of the Ohio Secretary of State in testimony before the Higher Education subcommittee, "Beginning in 2012 – the first year our office conducted the statewide mailing – we saw record absentee voting turnout. Approximately one-third of all statewide votes cast their ballots prior to Election Day, primarily by mail..."

New voting patterns outside of Election Day – including Vote by Mail -- have drastically reduced the number of precincts needed to handle demand were it to suddenly increase. Since 2006, more than 2000 precincts have been consolidated at a cost savings to the state of \$4.4 million. “The savings realized from precinct consolidation will easily cover the \$1.25 million as requested by the Secretary of State,” said Ellis Jacobs with Miami Valley Voter Protection Coalition.

Failure to provide for the funds for this mailing is particularly troublesome because last year the legislature, with passage of SB 205, prohibited the Secretary of State and local Boards of Elections from sending out these unsolicited absentee applications unless specifically appropriated by the General Assembly,” said Cathy Johnston with the Coalition on Homelessness and Housing Ohio. “SB 205 effectively eliminated a critical elections administration tool for local boards and tied the hands of the Secretary of State from using his discretion from using funding from any other source including federal funding.”

“With unprecedented support, increased popularity of vote by mail and cost savings from precinct consolidation,” said Deidra Reese with the Ohio Voter Rights Coalition, “we call on the Ohio House to reconsider their \$1.25 million funding omission and include it in the omnibus amendment or else repeal the prohibition on sending absentee mailings.”

The Ohio Voter Rights Coalition includes voting activists from around the state.

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