

Written Testimony on House Bill 680
House State & Local Government Committee
June 3, 2020
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Chairman Wiggam, Vice Chair Stephens, Ranking Member Kelly, and members of the Committee,

AARP is a nonpartisan, social mission organization with an age 50+ membership of nearly 37 million nationwide, and approximately 1.5 million members here in Ohio. On behalf of our members and all older Ohioans, we appreciate the dedication with which our state's leaders have responded to the coronavirus pandemic, as well as the ongoing efforts of the General Assembly to address challenges moving forward. As you consider the next steps to address the various facets of this public health emergency, we urge you to continue to be especially mindful of older adults, who are most at risk from this disease. As currently drafted, we must oppose House Bill 680 and appreciate the opportunity to provide some recommendations that we believe will protect Ohioans as they seek to access the ballot box this November.

AARP Ohio worked in close partnership with Secretary of State Frank LaRose to help educate older Ohioans on the process for participating in the Ohio primary election after the passage of House Bill 197. As you may imagine, there was much confusion among voters related to election changes during the pandemic. AARP Ohio worked to help educate voters during the brief delay in holding the primary, including holding a statewide tele-town hall with Secretary of State LaRose to answer voters' questions, an on-line social media campaign including animated videos explaining the process for obtaining an absentee ballot, and full-page ads in over sixty Ohio newspapers replicating the absentee ballot application form that voters could use if they did not have access to a computer or printer. Looking forward to Ohio's general election, we believe that rather than being subject to an alternative system that must be approved by the General Assembly, Ohio's elections system should have clearly articulated alternative methods for participating that can be communicated well in advance of November 3.

We believe that it is important to take action now to ensure that all registered voters can cast their ballots safely. For nearly 40 years, the turnout of voters over the age of 45 has significantly outpaced that of younger Americans. For example, according to U.S. Census Bureau data for the 2016 presidential election, 71 percent of Americans over the age of 65 voted. That's compared with just 46 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds. Moreover, people over the age of 65 show up to the polls far more than any other age group and are more likely to volunteer as poll workers and election leaders within their community.

However, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that people over 65 years of age and those with serious health conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, and lung disease seem to be at the highest risk for severe disease and even death from COVID-19 related illness. Additionally, we must not neglect older Ohioans living in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities where their access to family is limited, severely restricting their ability to have caregivers help them navigate the voting process from within their nursing home seclusion. As such, we strongly encourage the Committee to consider the following recommendations to help protect both Ohioans health and their right to vote:

- Mail an absentee ballot application to all registered voters;
- Provide prepaid return postage on envelopes for absentee ballot application forms and absentee ballots;
- Permit online absentee ballot requests;
- Maintain and ensure adequate in-person voting opportunities compliant with CDC guidelines for voters who chose to vote at their regular polling location;
- In addition to expanding the length of our early voting period, including some weekend days, we recommend allowing counties to establish satellite early voting locations beyond the county board of elections office. This issue is particularly important for rural Ohioans;
- Create an expanded network of drop-off boxes for completed ballots beyond the county board of elections office, again, an important consideration for rural Ohioans;
- Allow a provision for good Samaritans who seek to help family or neighbors by authorizing them to drop off up to ten ballots; this helps ensure ballots are being collected and submitted via personal connections rather than political organizations;
- Improve poll worker recruitment and allow recruitment from local high schools and universities; and
- To combat delayed results on Election Day, we recommend allowing boards of elections the ability to begin processing ballots daily starting 14 days before the election. Not only does that make sure the ballot is ready to count on Election Day, but it also provides boards of elections an

opportunity to contact voters if there is a technical error with their ballot so that it can be corrected.

It is unfortunate that measures must be taken to ensure that every eligible voter can safely exercise their right to vote in November without fear of contracting COVID-19, but older Ohioans should not fear a risk to their lives or health to vote. No one should. We believe Ohio needs to have a plan in place for November's general election. There is no harm in putting in place today a framework for conducting the November election by mail while also preserving in-person voting options and utilizing the next several months to educate Ohioans on that process. That plan needs to be in place now before the Ohio General Assembly recesses for the summer because further delay could be detrimental to the state's ability to protect voters, election officials, and volunteers who staff polling locations, many of whom are retirees, while dealing with the volume we would expect at the polls on November 3.

These are challenging times for all of Ohio's residents and at no time has it ever been more critical to have an agenda that takes into consideration the unique circumstances impacting aging Ohioans. As Ohioans look toward our elected officials for leadership, we at AARP look forward to working with you to ensure that the largest voting bloc in our state, the 50+ voter, can continue to have a safe and secure way to exercise their right to vote during this unprecedented time. We appreciate the opportunity to voice our opposition to House Bill 680 and offer our recommendations to strengthen the legislation on behalf of older Ohioans. Please, feel free to contact our office if you have any questions or would like additional information.