

Hunger Network in Ohio



Faithful voters want clarity and access to the ballot in November, regardless of public health conditions.

Chairman Wiggam, Ranking Member Kelly, and members of the State and Local Government Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in opposition to HB 680.

My name is Deacon Nick Bates, and I am the director of the Hunger Network in Ohio. The Hunger Network is a faith-based network that believes we can end hunger by addressing the root causes of poverty in Ohio. As a coalition of Lutherans, Methodists, Episcopalians, Congregationalists and many others, we work everyday to show love to our neighbors through food pantries, community meals, clothing closets, and other forms of service and assistance.

Thank you for the opportunity to voice our opposition to HB 680 today. HB 680 will create barriers to voting in November by shortening the timeline by one week and limits the Secretary of state in covering postage. Instead we should be covering postage and keep the calendar open at its current dates.

Many social ministry organizations not only provide immediate relief for households in need, but connect them to social workers, SNAP and public benefits, and even register them to vote. Churches, for many decades, have offered rides to the polls, host non-partisan candidate forums, and seek to engage in non-partisan education so that communities know their voting rights, the process, and know where to find credible information.

When the chaos surrounding Ohio's March primary hit, many faith leaders struggled to have clear information to pass along to their community. Barriers and confusion existed around in person voting at early vote centers, accessing printed absentee ballot request forms, and much more. We are supportive of a plan in place now to handle the November election whether it run normally or adapted around public health orders. Instead of HB 680's provisions we encourage the General Assembly to adapt these three recommendations.

We encourage the Ohio General Assembly to:

1. **Allow absentee ballots to be requested online.** Voter registration, much of our BMV activity, and banking is done securely online. Ohioans should be able to request an absentee ballot online.
2. **Mail absentee ballot request forms to all registered voters.** During the pandemic, one of the growing needs identified by faith leaders across the state was technology barriers. Many families do not have printers in their home or reliable internet access.
3. **Expand early vote centers.** If all votes matter, than we should have early vote centers distributed based on the wisdom of of local leaders at the county level to meet the population needs. It doesn't make sense for Franklin County and Cuyahoga county, with over 1 million people, to have the same number of centers as Ohio's smallest counties.
4. **Return of ballots should be pre-paid postage.** Requiring additional postage attached to absentee ballots presents a barrier to people without postage on hand. My post office in the Hilltop doesn't even have a postage machine in the lobby. I have waited 20 or 30 minutes in line to be able to purchase a few stamps.

Voting access is about how we show love to our neighbors. there are few acts more loving than asking somebody for their opinion. If we want to build a world on the value of love of neighbor, we need to make sure all have access to vote this November.

Thank you for your time and I will be happy to answer any questions.