



Ohio Voter Rights Coalition

Testimony of Deidra Reese before
The House Finance and Appropriations Committee
April 16, 2015

Chairman Smith and members of the House Finance and Appropriations Committee.

My name is Deidra Reese and I am here representing the Ohio Voter Rights Coalition, which is a group of organizations and individuals committed to democracy and access to the ballot. We encourage non-partisan civic engagement of Ohio Voters.

In December of 2013, I testified before the House Policy and Legislative Oversight Committee, and expressed our opposition to language in SB 205 of the 130th GA that prohibited county boards of elections from mailing unsolicited absentee ballot applications and restricted the Secretary of State after 2014, to do so ONLY if there were a specific appropriation for that purpose. At that time, the Ohio Voter Rights Coalition argued that such a provision creates a barrier to absentee voting by eliminating the discretion in the Agency Budget and prohibiting the use funds other than the GRF, such as federal dollars.

It is the understanding of our coalition that Secretary Husted submitted a request for \$1.25 million for mailing absentee ballots in the 2016 Presidential Election. We applaud Secretary Husted for making that request as we believe the use of the absentee vote will allow greater participation in the election process. We were dismayed to learn that it had not been included in the substitute bill. At the time this language was passed in SB 205, it was implied that the General Assembly would indeed fund this mailing, as there is great support for absentee voting and resources have been expended encouraging Ohio voters to vote by this method.

If the General Assembly felt it necessary to restrict the funding of the mailing to come only from the legislature, and then indeed it has an obligation to fund it by stating it so explicitly in statute. One of the main arguments against county boards carrying out these mailings was that it was not uniform as some counties had the capacity and others did not. Placing this duty in the hands of the SOS, would address that issue, but as it stands, there will be the perhaps unintended consequence of partisan operatives sending absentee ballot applications to only those they wish to engage in the franchise, while countless other voters will be missed. The members of the Ohio Voter Rights Coalition believe this is unfair to the voters of Ohio and creates the lack of uniformity that was decried in the past.

Not only is the message inconsistent with the spirit of inclusion and engagement of eligible voters, the impact is damaging. The failure to fund the mailing sends the message that we do not want voters to use this process that is authorized by law and has been encouraged. While this is NOT the General Assembly that passed this restrictive language, you have a responsibility to address the problem. Policy makers cannot have it both ways. You cannot on one hand say it must be mailed only by the Secretary if we fund

it and make with a decision NOT to fund it, while on the other hand say you want greater engagement and more voters to participate in the process. Voters already have to take the responsibility of completing the form, paying the postage to return it and being careful of any errors that could cause their ballot to be rejected. This restrictive language impedes the ability of the Secretary to do the job, which you mandated as the only government entity allowed to do it, while taking away the ability to do so by refusing to fund it.

We request that this committee amend Substitute House Bill 64 to include the modest \$1.25 million appropriation as requested by the Secretary of State or that Revised Code Section 3501.05 (DD) be repealed.

There is already distrust of our government and the belief that there an agenda to pass restrictive voting laws. If there truly is the desire to engage all eligible voters and create opportunities to vote, the solution is simple. Either appropriate the funds and allow the Secretary of State to carry out this function or repeal the language that restricts his flexibility to do it even if he were able to secure federal or other funds for that purpose.

Funding a mailing is the right thing to do and I urge you on behalf of our coalition to amend the bill to include this funding.

Thank you for allowing me to offer testimony on this important matter. I would be happy to answer any questions.