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June 3, 2020

Good Afternoon

Chairman Wiggam, Ranking Member Kelly, and members of the State and Local Government Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide witness testimony in reference to HB680.

My name is Pierrette “Petee” Talley, from Toledo, Ohio. I’m a community activist and convener of Ohio Coalition on Black Civic Participation “Ohio Unity Coalition” a network of statewide organizations working in partnership to increase civic participation of Black Ohioans. The member organizations of the network include fraternities, sororities, union members, masonic orders, civil rights organizations, retirees, community organizations, and leaders/congregants of churches and represent hundreds of thousands of Ohioans.

We write to oppose HB 680. HB680 will make voting harder for many Ohioans and particularly, those members of our partner organizations.

Ohio’s 2020 primary election was confusing and disorderly for many voters who historically cast their ballots in-person at their polling locations, but found themselves faced with voting absentee as a result of the last minute decision to close in-person voting on March 17.

Only a fraction of voters managed to complete the process of requesting and completing their ballots as a result of having to try and figure out how to navigate the absentee process at the height of COVID-19 quarantine orders. And even after having done so, some of those ballots were not counted because of errors or arriving outside of the deadline. There was no real public education on the unfamiliar process imposed by the general assembly’s mandate; just a postcard which served no useful purpose except to direct voters to a website and to local Boards of Elections telephone numbers which were not adequately staffed.

A repeat of the same as we head to the November General Election would be disastrous, as even more voters will be voting in the election. Yet, we understand that HB 680, the bill introduced by Representative Abrams, would accomplish very little except to make voting harder and more complicated. Instead, we support the following sensible reforms that will make voting safe and easy. Any legislation should include:

- Sending an absentee ballot application to all voters and paying the return postage,
- Keeping the current election calendar and not shortening the early voting period.
- Funding the cost of the return of all completed ballots by mail, particularly if there will not be in-person voting.
- Expanding the number of early voting locations based on the variation of geography and population size.
- Empowering local boards of elections to make decisions based on their experience to utilize procedures that engage voters and keep them safe while voting.

These recommendations outline a few of the reforms we believe should be included as you deliberate making changes. At a minimum these measures would help voters navigate the process. Voters need options and it is unthinkable that they should not have to choose between their health and their right to exercise their franchise.

We believe HB 680 is nothing but a veiled attempt to roll back the voting rights of Ohioans who deserve to have their votes cast and counted in not only the upcoming general election, but also in future elections.

Our state and our nation are already experiencing extreme stress. Don't make our lives harder by making voting more difficult and less accessible. We urge you to vote no on HB680.

Thank you,

Pierrette Talley

Pierrette "Petee" Talley, Convener

Ohio Coalition on Black Civic Participation/Ohio Unity Coalition