

Good morning Chairman Wilkin, Vice Chair White, Ranking Member Sweeney and distinguished Members of this Committee. My name is Robert Frost and I am a former member of the Cuyahoga County Board of Elections and past President of the Ohio Association of Election Officials. While my testimony today does not represent an official position of the OAEO, yet, I would like to start by thanking every Member involved in shaping this and other elections legislation for engaging with the OAEO – the people who administer elections in this state – to help make sure that any changes in election law work as intended. I firmly believe that input from the OAEO over the past few years helped you, the General Assembly, fairly fund the purchases of new voting equipment across Ohio, authorize online voter registration, allow the expansion and improvement of early in-person voting, and grapple with the circumstances of voting during a global pandemic in a contentious Presidential election year – all in a manner that actually worked in practice. Thank you.

The bill before this Committee today, HB 294, is a good bill that promotes even greater voter access, election integrity and efficient administration. The creation of an automated voter registration and verification system is a necessary and worthwhile step forward in a state like ours, where it is already easy to vote and to register to vote. The changes contemplated in HB 294 meet the voters where they are, which is to say, we know that when people move their residence, one of their first thoughts is to update their driver's license or other ID. And perhaps one of their last thoughts is to change their voter registration, at least until the next election when it can potentially be too late. Improving and expanding the processes at the BMV to capture more voter registrations and updates will have a tremendous positive impact on access for voters. Of course, boards of elections in Ohio already receive some registration data from the BMV, and by taking this opportunity to improve the mechanisms and procedures for the capture and exchange of that data will further improve the accuracy of our voter rolls.

Next, I'd like to focus on the proposed establishment of a system for online application for absent voters' ballots, the natural next step in modernizing Ohio elections. HB 294 is worth supporting for this single issue alone! As boards of elections manage the reality of ever more voters choosing to receive and return their ballots by mail at a time when the US Postal Service faces challenges of its own, providing voters with the option of eliminating one mailing from the process of voting by mail is huge. Allowing voters to apply for their ballot online not only saves precious time to help unsure ballots are received and returned on time, it also will increase accuracy by eliminating incomplete applications and by removing one less opportunity for human error in translating data from a paper form – usually filled out by hand by the voter.

Along with these first two important major changes, there are other improvements for voter access and election administration in HB 294 that merit your support. Among these are allowing the use of electronic forms of acceptable identification documents, allowing more 17 year-olds to serve as precinct election officials, continuing to provide for curbside voting for the physically challenged while ensuring that it is restricted to only those circumstances where it is warranted, and reallocating the final Monday early voting hours to other days so that boards can focus on Election Day preparations, all are changes for the better to Ohio's election system.

In coming before you today in support of HB 294, I do have two suggestions that I believe deserve your consideration as you work in Committee and in the full House towards a final bill. First, I urge you to consider allowing boards of elections to utilize their drop boxes year-round. A system in which a voter can vote early in person or by mail on one date, but cannot access the board of elections drop box to return their ballot until a later date would cause unnecessary confusion. Additionally, the drop box is a convenient place for voters to drop off their registration card or absentee ballot application. Second and finally, I applaud your responsiveness to the need to move the absentee ballot request deadline but encourage you to set that deadline at one week – 7 days prior to the election – which will provide sufficient time for ballot turnaround while keeping the option of requesting a ballot by mail open to voters for a greater amount of time.

I applaud you for the time and effort that have gone into this legislation and for providing the opportunity to be heard on these issues today, and I again encourage you to pass HB 294 if for no other reason than the two big, topline issues: automated voter registration and online absentee ballot applications. Thank you.