



July 13, 2020

AARP Rhode Island Testimony on H 7896 and H 7200

Members of the Committee

On behalf of our 132,00 Rhode Island members and all older Rhode Islanders, we appreciate the dedication with which our state's leaders have responded to the coronavirus pandemic, as well as the ongoing efforts required as we move 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.

With voters set to go to the polls on September 8th, we believe that Rhode Island should take action 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.

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 highest risk for severe disease and even death from COVID-19 related illness.

In order to protect Rhode Island's voters, election officials, and workers who staff polling locations, many of whom are retirees, we believe the General Assembly should act quickly to promote alternative means for a voter to cast his or her ballot, specifically the use of unrestricted mail ballots for all registered voters without the requirement that the ballot be witnessed and/or notarized. Older Rhode Islanders should not have to risk their lives or their health to exercise their right to vote. We also believe that mail ballots postmarked by Election Day and received within three days of the election, or received without a postmark the day after the election, should be counted. Moreover, an adequate number of drop boxes should be used so that voters who do not wish to mail in their ballot can safely and easily access a drop box – one per community will not be adequate for larger localities.

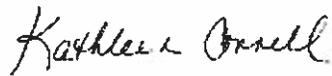
In addition, in public discussion and at the State House, AARP Rhode Island has recommended two priorities that we believe must not be overlooked. Rhode Island should:

- Mandate in-person polling places be open and not abandoned in any predominately mail-ballot only election.
- Require the Secretary of State to record mail-in votes starting 20 days prior to Election Day.

These are challenging times for all Rhode Island residents. As Rhode Islanders 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 population, the 50+ voter, can continue to have a safe and secure way to exercise their right to vote during this unprecedented time.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this issue of great importance to our state's voters. If you have questions, please contact Communications Director John Martin at 401-248-2671.

Sincerely,



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