



State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations  
Department of State | Office of the Secretary of State  
Nellie M. Gorbea, *Secretary of State*

June 10, 2020

The Honorable Robert E. Craven, Sr., Chairman  
House Committee on Judiciary  
State House  
Providence, RI 02903

Dear Chairman Craven:

I hope this letter finds you and your family in good health. I am writing with regards to House bill 7901, Substitute A pertaining to the 2020 declaration of candidacies and nomination signatures that must be obtained to be placed on the ballot in September and November. Over the past couple weeks, I have met with several civic organizations, Democratic City and Town Committees, along with candidates – both elected incumbents and challengers about this next part of the 2020 election cycle. The majority of people who have spoken with me are concerned about the ability to collect nomination signatures during the pandemic in a way that keeps candidates and voters healthy and safe. Those conversations have bolstered my belief that it is important to provide accommodations this year to ensure that candidates for public office have every opportunity to gather nomination signatures in a manner that protects the public health.

As you know, the signature gathering process requires a lot of face to face interaction which presents unique concerns this year due to the Coronavirus pandemic. Recently, I and members of the Board of Elections met with Dr. McDonald from the Department of Health to get his insight from a public health perspective on the election process and signature collection issue. Specifically, after listening to how the nomination signature process works, Dr. McDonald expressed concern about candidates sharing pens with multiple persons while gathering signatures. He also expressed concerns with candidates being able to maintain the six feet distance when collecting signatures.

With this background I am proposing the following temporary revisions to the statutes governing the nomination signature process for the 2020 election cycle only, more specifically:

- Candidates should be allowed to email nomination papers to voters and have the papers returned electronically. In addition, I believe an electronic (either true electronic or scanned) signatures, should be accepted on nomination papers.

- There should be some reduction in the signatures needed for candidates to be placed on the ballot.

The above proposals are consistent with those taken in other states to address similar concerns regarding the pandemic. Massachusetts and Michigan are two states that have reduced the number of signatures and also allowed for some form of electronic collection. However, it is important to note both did so through litigation - with the courts making the final decision on the election calendar and activities.

With the candidate declaration period coming up quickly on June 22, 23 and 24, it is critically important that the General Assembly address this matter quickly. My office is responsible for not just the forms, but also guides for candidates. All of these require a final statement that can allow candidates to proceed knowing the rules for the election.

I believe these recommendations ensure access to the ballot for all Rhode Islanders who desire to run for office while also protecting the health of our citizens during this challenging time in our country's history.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nellie M. Gorbea". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "N" and "G".

Nellie M. Gorbea  
Secretary of State

cc. House Judiciary Committee members