

July 21, 2020

Government Administration and Elections Committee Listening Session

Dear Senator Flexer, Representative Fox, Senator Sampson, Representative France and distinguished members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee:

Please find beginning on page 2 of this testimony a letter Hamden Action Now and many other organizations signed to legislative leaders on July 10th, 2020. This letter reflects my staunch support for expanded absentee voting--but I want to emphasize that while adding a one-time COVID-19 excuse to vote absentee for the 2020 general election, the current draft bill still restricts voting rights beyond the language of Connecticut's state constitution.

Beyond the November general election, the draft bill would allow voters to get absentee ballots because of "such elector's or person's illness." If we remove these four words -- "such elector's or person's" -- from the draft bill regarding absentee ballot voting, it will ensure that as long as the pandemic remains in America eligible Connecticut voters will have access to voting rights -- including any possible special elections early in 2021.

Future legislatures should not have to continue to come back in for special sessions to protect voting rights.

We expect our legislature led by my state senator, Senate President Pro Tempore Martin Looney, to make this change immediately. Thank you for leading in this difficult time and again please find beginning on page 2 the July 10th letter that more fully explains why this change to the draft bill is needed.

Sincerely,

Rhonda Caldwell
Founder, Hamden Action Now

Honorable Governor Ned Lamont
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210 Capitol Avenue

Hartford, CT 06106

Honorable Senate President Pro Tempore Martin Looney
Legislative Office Building
Room 3300
Hartford, CT 06106-1591

Honorable Senate Majority Leader Bob Duff
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Honorable House Majority Leader Matt Ritter
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Honorable House Majority Leader Matt Ritter
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July 10, 2020

Dear Governor Lamont and Legislative Leaders:

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread across America, threatening the health and safety of Americans from coast to coast. From Texas, to Florida, to Tennessee, to dozens of states in between, the spikes we are witnessing are alarming, and the failure of the federal government to contain this virus nationwide is disrupting life across America. It is a troubling situation with no end in sight, and as we weather this first wave of the virus, we will undoubtedly see rolling impacts across America, with

potentially a second or even a third wave ahead. We should expect and prepare for COVID-19 to be with us for months and potentially years to come.

As you know, as advocates for voting rights, we place a high priority on ensuring fair and safe elections are accessible to all Connecticut residents. We know you share these principles and are committed to upholding voting rights and public safety during this unprecedented time. In this once-in-a-century pandemic, crowded in-person polling places could put the lives of our seniors, residents with pre-existing conditions, and others at risk. With fears about indoor lines at polling places, it is only logical that Connecticut does what most other states – led by both Republicans and Democrats – already do. We should allow all eligible residents to vote absentee and make it as easy as possible to cast ballots. It's the best way to safeguard public health and ensure the virus won't impede Connecticut's democracy. Dozens of states nationwide have acted already.

But as you prepare to enter a special session to ensure all eligible Connecticut residents are able to vote by absentee ballot in the upcoming elections, we implore you to look ahead to the future -- and ensure that voting rights are protected well past November. We need to prepare now for what's ahead.

Though Connecticut's COVID-19 cases have significantly subsided, massive new clusters of COVID-19 are emerging across the country, and we should, at minimum, prepare for the virus to potentially return to Connecticut in a significant way. **That's why, when it comes to voting rights, we offer simple solutions: we should align state statute with the state constitution to ensure voting rights are secured; ensure absentee ballot applications are sent to every eligible voter; install dropboxes in safe public locations; and continue to allow absentee voting beyond the potential development, approval process and distribution of a COVID-19 vaccine.**

Currently, Connecticut General Statutes 9-135 (a) (3) allows voters to get absentee ballots because of "his or her illness." It is limiting language that, if left in place, could impact voting in elections to come, past November, while COVID is still with us. However, if we remove these three words -- "his or her" -- from the state statute regarding absentee ballot voting, it will ensure that as long as the pandemic remains, residents will have access to voting rights. We also do not believe that future legislatures should have to continue to come back in for special session, during a pandemic, to make commonsense changes to voting rights. Removing "his or her" would solve for that problem, ensuring that while COVID-19 is in America, Connecticut residents are able to seamlessly cast ballots.

Absentee ballot applications for the primary are already being sent out to registered Connecticut voters, and cleaning up our state's voter rolls in the process. We *must* ensure every voter who chooses to vote absentee in the general election has access to an application - meaning absentee ballot applications should be sent to every eligible voter - period. It is equally important to have a safeguarded and accessible location to drop off absentee ballots, which is why leaders must work with towns to provide secure access to dropboxes. These dropboxes are already being placed in secure public locations - specifically designed for elections and in accordance with stringent design and security standards.

Even if a vaccine is developed to address COVID-19 - which is highly unlikely before the November elections there will still be a significant need to continue social distancing for an extended period of time, and the efficacy of any vaccine will depend on factors largely out of CT residents' control. Simply put, we can't let the fate of voting rights get lost in a future we can't predict.

Adapting and modernizing voting rights measures have been met with bipartisan support across the nation because it's understood no one should have to choose between protecting their health and casting their vote. In Connecticut specifically, recent polling shows:

- An overwhelming 77% of voters support legislation that would add the coronavirus outbreak, or other public health emergency, as a valid legal excuse to vote by absentee ballot.
- 76% of voters expressed support for keeping polling locations open while also giving all voters the option to vote absentee.
- Support for this measure in Connecticut is broad and bipartisan, with 64% of Republicans, 68% of Independent voters, and 91% of Democrats reporting approval.

Indeed, expanding access to voting during a pandemic is not just the right thing to do. It's extraordinarily popular.

Connecticut is counting on legislators to provide lasting access to the democratic process. A simple removal of three words — “his or her” — from the state statute can enhance both public safety and voting rights. Additionally, this proposal remedies a disconnect between Connecticut's statutory law and constitution. As we continue to navigate the many unknowns of the new normal, it's incumbent upon our leadership to guarantee one of our most fundamental rights - the right to vote.

Sincerely,

ACLU of Connecticut
Action Together CT - New Haven County
Association of Retired Teachers of Connecticut (ARTC)
Common Cause in Connecticut
Communications Workers of America Local 1298
Connecticut AFL-CIO
Connecticut Citizen Action Group
Connecticut Employees Union Independent CEUI SEIU Local 511
Connecticut League of Conservation Voters
CSEA SEIU Local 2001
CT Alliance for Retired Americans
CT Black Women
CT Shoreline Indivisible
Hamden Action Now
Hamden Progressive Action Network (HamPAN)
Hispanic Federation Connecticut State Office
League of Women Voters of Connecticut
Moral Monday CT
New Haven Votes Coalition
Norwalk Women Who Vote
PAN34 (Progressive Action Network for the 34th District)
ReSisters
SEIU - CT State Council
SEIU Local 32BJ
Sierra Club Connecticut

Southern New England Conference of the United Church of Christ
The Arc Connecticut
UU the Vote CT
Varick Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church
Yale Preventative Medicine Interest Group
YWCA New Britain

Rhonda L. Caldwell