

SPLC ACTION

**Written Statement of Terry C. Landry, Jr.
of the
Southern Poverty Law Center
before
House Committee on House and Governmental Affairs
State of Louisiana**

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Baton Rouge, Louisiana

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Louisiana Officials Must Act

to ensure that Louisiana can carry out safe and democratic elections during this national crisis—including in November. The proposed emergency plan submitted by the Secretary of State's office is detailed and contains many of the changes Louisiana must make in advance of elections this summer.

Specifically, the following changes are crucial and must remain in the final version of the plan approved by the legislature:

- ¾ The early vote period should be extended from seven to thirteen days at minimum. Preferably, the state would offer twenty-one days of early voting, including Sundays.
- ¾ Polling places in senior centers, nursing homes, etc. must be relocated as soon as possible and affected voters must receive clear, individual notice of changes to their polling location. We applaud the Secretary for setting an April 22nd deadline for officials to identify polling places that will need to be moved.
- ¾ Ballots for the primary election must be reprinted due to their prolonged storage in a non-airconditioned warehouse. Attempting to use the old ballots to cut costs could create significant machine issues.
- ¾ We applaud the Secretary's emergency plan for detailing how vote tabulation and absentee by mail tabulation will be affected by the emergency. The office must remain prepared to hire additional staff and for vote counting to take longer than normal. The public must be prepared for delays in the return of election results.
- ¾ State law requires voters who register by mail to cast their ballots in person the first time that they vote. This requirement must be waived.
- ¾ The expansion of absentee balloting will be critical for elections conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Voters who are concerned about exposure or transmission of COVID-19 must be able to vote via absentee ballot and that excuse must remain listed on the absentee ballot application. The proposed COVID-19 emergency absentee ballot application, however, should *not* require voters to identify a specific excuse to vote absentee; the excuse section should be removed from the application.
- ¾ Current law requires absentee ballots to have a witness signature on the absentee ballot's envelope flap. The draft emergency plan states that this requirement will not be a valid reason to challenge an absentee ballot during the COVID-19 pandemic. The witnessing requirement should be waived outright, but the proposed fix is sufficient provided that election officials are properly trained about the change.
- ¾ The requirement that voters have their absentee ballot applications witnessed by two people must be waived. The plan should also waive witnessing requirements for voters who use a mark or are unable to sign.

election. To address higher voting-by-mail volume, allow early processing of ballots before Election Day.

EARLY IN-PERSON VOTING

$\frac{3}{4}$ Extend the in-person early vote period to *at least* 14 days of early voting before Election Day—