



Statement from the Honorable Tre Hargett
Tennessee Secretary of State

Before the Committee on Senate Rules and Administration
United States Senate

July 22, 2020

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and esteemed members of this committee. I am grateful and honored to be given the opportunity to speak before you today. You and your colleagues are in my prayers during this challenging time for our nation and our world. I appreciate your service to our great nation.

While I don't speak for each Secretary of State or chief election official in our country, I express our appreciation for the election-specific appropriation from the CARES Act. In Tennessee, these dollars have been instrumental in providing for additional ballot scanning equipment, larger ballot boxes, absentee envelopes, hand sanitizer, PPE, poll worker recruitment and public outreach. Tennessee is also one of the fortunate states that was able to meet the necessary match requirement for these funds. I would humbly ask that if there is an additional round of money appropriated for election administration for the upcoming election that those funds not have a match requirement component and also be free of additional federal mandates requiring states to change the manner and method of casting of votes.

I have confidence that each of you cares deeply about the ability of our states to conduct elections, and I hope you will continue to respect each state's authority to conduct elections in the manner that has or will work in their respective states. It would not be appropriate, nor do we need to federalize the administration of our elections. What works in Tennessee may not work in Colorado, Oregon, or Missouri and vice-versa. We must continue to understand that one-size does not fit all when it comes to elections.

I am sure you are interested in learning about our preparations to conduct the current and upcoming elections during COVID-19. In mid-March we began working to purchase necessary items such as absentee ballot envelopes that we anticipated could be subject to supply-chain issues, and we set up working groups of local and state election officials along with private industry partners to develop our COVID-19 election contingency plan. We also had health experts review the plan and participate in statewide training conference calls. The result was a detailed 85-page election plan that thought through every possible step of the election process including how to reduce the touchpoints in the election process, sanitization of polling sites, increasing the size and number of early voting polling sites as well as their hours of operations,

and recruitment of additional poll officials. The health and safety of poll officials and Tennessee's voters has been of utmost importance to us throughout our planning process.

Our "Be A Patriot. Become A Poll Official" campaign yielded over 3,100 new poll officials, which shouldn't come as a surprise given Tennessee's recognition as "The Volunteer State." Specifically, our new poll officials will help us fill the gap of poll officials who may not want to work during the election cycle this year. Building a bench of new poll officials will also help in the future since our average poll worker is over 65 years of age. We have put an emphasis on recruiting 16 and 17 years old this year. We believe this will encourage our young people to be civically engaged for the rest of their lives.

There has been a lot of conversation nationally about mail-in ballots. While over a period of years and decades some states have moved to a system of mailing ballots to each registered voter, most states have continued to primarily utilize in-person voting to conduct their elections. Prior to a recent court ruling (which is under appeal), more than a third of Tennessee's registered voters were eligible to request and cast an absentee ballot under one of 14 different excuses provided by Tennessee law.

Tennesseans love to cast a ballot in-person. Historically over 98% of Tennessee voters cast a ballot during Tennessee's robust early voting period or on Election Day. During the average presidential election, over 60% of the votes will have already been cast during early voting. Tennessee is a state that has built our election infrastructure around our voters' habits of voting in person. Last Friday, our early voting period began, and I traveled to 10 counties to observe early voting as well as how our counties were meeting the challenge of administering elections during the current pandemic. Voters are coming to their voting sites with confidence and enthusiasm to vote in these elections, and without fail they lauded the precautions and efforts made by our state and local election officials to ensure the health and safety of our voters and poll officials.

Additionally, when it comes to mail-in ballots, we can mail out ballots in a timely fashion and voters can return them in what they deem is timely to ensure their return by Election Day.

However, we have no control over the operations of the United States Postal Service. Each election year without fail counties mail ballots that are never returned or that are received weeks after election day.

Now, recent reports of operational issues with the U.S. Postal Service cause an even greater erosion in confidence in the ballots cast by mail. Whether it is the timely delivery of these ballots, the dumping of ballots in the lobby of apartment complexes in New Jersey, a voter registration application being sent to a cat in Georgia, or the recent ballot harvesting issues in North Carolina, and even in Tennessee where a voter's absentee ballot was mailed to her on the day she passed away and somehow the ballot was returned, it remains true that the most secure and private way to cast a ballot is through in-person voting.

In the state court system in Tennessee, advocates for by-mail voting persuaded the court that voting safeguards existing under current Tennessee law should help prevent voter fraud. Interestingly enough, in federal court advocates for by-mail voting are asking the federal court to weaken the same safeguards that advocates in the state court cited as being effective safeguards.

Also, the emphasis the U.S. Senate and the current administration placed on security and preparedness has yielded dividends. As some of you are aware, on the morning of our presidential preference primary in March, devastating tornadoes struck downtown Nashville and Davidson County along with the neighboring counties of Wilson and Putnam. As part of our ongoing preparedness efforts, we have participated in tabletop exercises from the Harvard Belfer Center as well as the United States Department of Homeland Security. Our state election officials have taken this practice and conducted similar exercises with our local election officials. The practice of a tornado striking a polling place came to real-life for us in Tennessee. I am happy to give more detail or answer any questions you may have regarding our response to those natural disasters.

In closing, thank you for your support and please continue to respect each state's authority to administer elections in the manner and method their states deem best to ensure the integrity, participation, and confidence in our elections.