Iowa State Association of County Auditors

IOWA STATE ASSOCIATION OF COUNTY AUDITORS

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May 11, 2020

The Honorable Chuck Grassley
135 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Senator Joni Ernst
730 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Grassley and Ernst:

As the officials tasked with administering elections in Iowa's 99 counties, we are committed to ensuring that every eligible voter in the state of Iowa can cast a ballot and have their vote counted. The Covid-19 pandemic presents a new challenge to our work – we must not only protect the right to vote, but also the health and safety of our voters, staff, and poll workers. We've already implemented many measures to address these concerns, such as extending the absentee in-person voting period from 29 days to 40, but there is more work to be done. And these measures come with a price tag.

While we applaud Congress for approving $4.9 million in election funding for Iowa through the CARES Act, we believe that this amount falls short of what is needed for safe and secure elections in 2020. Because of this, we urge you to support substantial additional funding for elections in the next coronavirus stimulus package. And to ensure that this funding is shared with local officials who are responsible for the majority of the additional costs associated with administering elections during a pandemic.

Many auditors are already navigating considerable challenges in preparing for the June primary election. For example, in previous elections, we relied heavily on our older population to staff in-person polling locations. But this year, many of these individuals will be unable to serve this role without exposing themselves to a substantial health risk. Due to these staffing shortages and the difficulty of recruiting and training replacement precinct poll workers, some counties are considering consolidating polling locations. The polling places that remain open will require new poll workers and additional staff to support curbside voting, along with personal protective equipment, cleaning supplies, and other resources to protect both our poll workers and our voters.

To further promote the safety and welfare of voters and poll workers, we worked with SecretaryPate to urge voters to cast mail ballots safely from their homes. The state is sending absentee ballot request forms with pre-paid return postage to every active voter in the state, an effort which has never been done before in Iowa. Secretary Pate explained to voters that "absentee voting from home is safe and secure," and recommended this option as "the best way to participate in the June primary election."[1] In addition, many auditors have launched voter education campaigns to ensure that their voters are fully informed about their options.

Voters have enthusiastically responded to these efforts. In late April – more than a month away from the primary election – the number of absentee ballot requests had already surpassed the total number of requests during the entire 2016 primary.[2] Looking ahead to November, we fully anticipate that a record number of votes will be cast by mail ballot in a year when experts were already predicting historically high turnout. Further, we believe that the pandemic will continue to impact voter behavior and poll worker attrition rates through November, even if it has been contained.

But increased mail voting will come with considerable additional costs. Each additional absentee voter will require more spending on envelopes, materials, and postage, including the return postage that counties are required to pay under state law. Some counties will need additional staff, supplies, and equipment to verify, process, and count each ballot. Some counties will need additional facility space to process and store ballots. And we will all need to be prepared to handle a spike in questions from voters about the absentee voting process, even though significant voter outreach and education efforts will be made.

These costs were unanticipated just two months ago and are coming at a time when both state and local budgets are facing considerable strain.

County auditors have experience running elections and are closest to the needs of our voters. We know what it will take to run safe and secure elections this year. We urge Congress to partner with us in this endeavor and to provide us with the resources we need to ensure that all Iowans can have their voices heard in 2020.

Thank you for your leadership and partnership.

Respectfully,

Roxanna Moritz
ISACA President

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[1] "Absentee voting period begins Thursday; Secretary Pate encourages Iowans to vote from home," Office of the Iowa Secretary of State, April 22, 2020, fhttps://sos.iowa.gov/news/2020_04_22.html.

[2] Brianne Pfannenstiel, "Absentee ballot requests spike as Iowans prepare to vote by mail in June primary elections," Des Moines Register, April 28, 2020, https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/politics/2020/04/28/coronavirus-prompts-spike-iowas-absentee-ballot-requests-2020/3043373001/.

Cc: Members of the Iowa Congressional Delegation
Leader Mitch McConnell
Speaker Nancy Pelosi
Leader Kevin McCarthy
Leader Charles E. Schumer