

LWW LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS[®] OF TENNESSEE

President
Marian Ott
Nashville

April 14, 2020

1st Vice President
Debby Gould
Nashville

Tre Hargett
Secretary of State

2nd Vice President
Linda Maccabe
Knoxville

Mark Goins
Coordinator of Elections

VIA EMAIL

Secretary
Leslie Collum
Murfreesboro

Dear Secretary Hargett and Coordinator Goins:

Treasurer
Lee Fairbend
Nashville

We share with you a commitment to having free, fair and well-run elections in Tennessee. We commend you and local election officials for quick actions to respond to the unanticipated impact of the tornados on the March primary elections. We also supported the legislative measures recently enacted by the General Assembly to provide more flexibility for similar events in the future.

DIRECTORS
Shelley Ames
Hendersonville

The pandemic presents challenges even beyond those anticipated from massive weather events. We were encouraged by the comprehensive planning efforts briefly outlined during recent state Election Commission meeting. Below are suggestions from volunteers in local leagues across the state that are informed by years of experience registering Tennesseans to vote and providing (nonpartisan) information about elections as well as from experience monitoring elections. You are likely considering many if not all the suggestions below; the League would like to add its voice as encouragement.

Barbara Gay
Nashville

Katrina Gay
Hendersonville

Sherry Hewlett
Memphis

Expand Opportunities to vote within existing legal framework:

Lisa Bilbrey Hyder
Chattanooga

Absentee Ballots

Kathryn King
Knoxville

- Promote absentee voting for those eligible, especially those 60 and older. The 60 and older voters may not realize that they can vote absentee.
- Provide an online template on the state website like the one used in Davidson County (though voters still have to download and sign, being able to fill in a template will likely result in more legible and accurate forms). At least for this election move the 60 and older reason to the top of the list.
- Mail all registered voters 60 and older an application for an absentee ballot
- Provide postage paid envelopes for the absentee ballot application, and then the ballot return envelope, (perhaps the stimulus funds could be used?)
- Expand capabilities for processing the absentee ballots; the League supports additional funding and perhaps procedural changes to facilitate the processing of what is likely to be a significant increase in absentee ballots

Brian Paddock
Cookeville

Mary Ann Reeves
Oak Ridge

Jo Singer
Franklin

Rynn Young
Knoxville

Peg Watkins
Memphis

- Clarify how CDC guidance and “stay at home” orders relate, if at all, to the existing reasons for an absentee ballot
- Educate voters about common problems with submitting an absentee ballot application and then the subsequent ballot. Voter education should also address the security of vote by mail including any tracking possible as well as provide clarity about remedies available to the voter if the ballot is not received in time (Provisional Ballot? Will it count if completed absentee ballot is not received in time by the Election Commission?).
- Insure there is clear direction that the mailed in ballot requires 2 stamps – even better is to provide prepaid envelope (and provide drop boxes)
- Suggest that state prepare a video about how to vote absentee which includes reminders about obvious pitfalls; if he has time, the League suggests Secretary Hargett would be a great spokesperson on the video

Other Suggestions

- Make maximum use of existing early voting provisions by encouraging counties to have multiple sites open if possible; again, perhaps the stimulus funding could be used to help counties with the expense
- Provide online training for election workers to limit in person contact; the League is pleased that at least one local election commission has announced such training
- Implement the new ability to have poll workers for shifts rather than the entire Election Day

Consider additional policies and perhaps expanded legal framework

The League commends your efforts to legislatively expand the ability of election officials to respond to catastrophic events that impact the administration of elections. Metro election officials, supported by the state officials, did a good job of conducting the election immediately after the tornado. The League supported the legislative changes recently passed to facilitate responding to similar emergencies in the future.

The League would encourage you to further consider expanding the “toolbox” that could be deployed in the event of future emergencies. Among the items the League would support:

- **No excuse absentee ballots** whenever there is a declared state or emergency or determined by the Secretary of State to be necessary to conduct a safe election
- Current law **REQUIRES** absentee ballots to be mailed in; allow **drop off box for ballots** at least at county election commissions
- Changes, if needed, in the requirements for **processing absentee ballots** to facilitate counting and reporting them in a timely manner.

Based on Coordinator Goins’ remarks at the recent state Election Commission meeting, it is likely that most if not all of the above are being considered by the various working groups. If you wish discuss any of the above or the League can be of any assistance, please contact me at president@lwvtn.org or 615-812-8462.

Sincerely,

Marian Ott
President