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Bills Circulating in Legislature Make It Harder to Vote Absentee

As a package of bills circulates in the state legislature for signature and introduction, Madison Mayor Rhodes-Conway released the following statement:

Make no mistake; a package of bills being circulated in the Capitol will make it harder, not easier, for voters to cast their ballots, especially absentee ballots.

LRB-1264, being circulated for coauthors, prohibits local clerks and elections boards from applying for or receiving grant funding for the purpose of administering Wisconsin elections. Madison was one of many local communities that understood that during a pandemic people would want a variety of safe ways to vote. Faced with a historic pandemic and in the absence of any action or aid from the state legislature, Madison applied for and received grant funds to install ballot boxes, purchase PPE for poll workers, and staff robust curbside voting operations.

From the Town of Lima to the Village of Luck, 216 grants were given to small towns and villages as well as big cities like Madison, Brookfield, and Waukesha. The legislature could have avoided this situation by giving all jurisdictions extra funding to protect voters, but failed to do so.

Rather than propose funding so all Wisconsin communities can have ballot boxes, the bill's authors would rather just punish the cities and towns that took action to protect voters and prevent any future innovation of this kind.

Today, if a voter can't easily hand in their absentee ballot they can give it to a neighbor or trusted friend to drop off for them. LRB-1537 creates numerous procedural hurdles by forcing each individual voter to designate, in writing, someone to drop off their ballot. The bill also undermines Madison's popular Democracy in the Park initiative which allowed voters to walk to a local park to hand their absentee ballot to an election official. The bill will effectively cut in half the amount of time these types of creative events can be held.

Another proposed bill, LRB-1935, would make it a felony for any employee of a retirement home or residential care facility to encourage a resident to apply for or cast an absentee ballot. This is a shocking abuse. Whether you are in your 90's or a first time voter, everyone should be encouraged to vote. The law as it is today rightly prevents employees only from telling people which candidate to vote for.

Similarly, LRB-0428 creates multiple bureaucratic hurdles for indefinitely confined voters casting their absentee ballots. First, the voter must make a declaration under oath that they are confined in order to achieve the designation of indefinitely confined, then they will have to renew every two years.