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An Urgent Call to Uphold Values of Access, Safety, and Equity

Coalition implores the Governor and legislative leaders to postpone the spring election

As Wisconsin's most robust nonpartisan pro-democracy advocates, Wisconsin Voices and our partners have always been careful to make sure that no matter how disenfranchising we think an election policy is, we err on the side of caution and use messages that convey hope, not despair. We do this because we don't want to discourage people even more from voting or getting involved in the civic process.

But in our current reality, there is nothing we can say that would make this election less difficult to participate in. The voting process is so cumbersome and confusing for Wisconsin's electorate right now that we feel it is our duty to name the harm we see happening and demand action to protect our democracy and our people. Bottom line: going ahead with an election on April 7 is racist, dangerous, and immoral.

By keeping polls open next week, the state is asking people to risk their lives (and the lives of others) in order to exercise their right to vote. No healthy democracy should ever force people to make this choice. Sure, some accommodations have been made: drive-up voting, extending the registration deadline. We believe that this is nowhere near enough and are last-minute Band-Aids stuck onto a deep, bleeding gash. In addition, changes and modifications are coming in confusing trickles here and there, without a clear voice and decisive mandate behind them. This is creating confusion at best and despairing abandonment at worst.

Wisconsin election commissioners have argued that the "risks of changing election law within weeks of the election" would lead to voter confusion. But hear this: Wisconsinites are *already* beyond confused right now. Registering to vote online isn't a simple process by any means and is not even an option for thousands of people. Folks understandably get deadlines for registration and requesting absentee ballots mixed up. Mailing back an absentee ballot correctly is cumbersome and has unnecessary burdens. There are reports of ballots being lost in the mail. People just want to vote without having so many hoops to jump through, especially now. Instead, would-be voters are yielding to overwhelm and resignation at alarming rates.

There have always been barriers to voting, and it's been largely people of color who are disenfranchised. This virus has only further polarized existing inequities in the infrastructures that have disproportionately harmed communities of color for decades. None of these facts are new. Who gets healthcare access, who has the ability to stay home when sick, and who has no choice but to put themselves in harm's way are all stark racial inequities in our state. Asking people of color to put themselves even at more risk to vote in a system that doesn't seem to care about them beyond their vote is racist. If elected officials on any sides want people of color

to vote for them, they need to put words into action and truly have the backs of these communities when it comes to their health, safety, and livelihoods.

The people who will be hurt the most by allowing an April 7 election are beyond count. Black and Brown folks, rural residents facing a severe shortage of poll workers, unregistered potential voters who were planning on using same-day registration, homeless communities, immunocompromised people and their families, seniors, people without internet or printers or smart phones, people with disabilities, and more will be harmed in some way.

Thankfully, it doesn't have to be that way. There are common sense solutions that will benefit every Wisconsinite, including Black, Brown, white, and indigenous. Here are the steps we believe need to be taken:

1. Postpone the election for at least 30 days.
2. Send DMV information to the Election Commission to automate registrations. The DMV has the most up-to-date information on potential voters and that data can be used to automatically register hundreds of thousands of people.
3. Send out absentee ballots to every eligible voter.
4. Eliminate witness signatures / addresses on absentee ballots.
5. Eliminate cumbersome photo ID requirements for absentee requests.
6. Run a statewide media campaign to inform the public of what they need to do to be able to vote.

If this crisis isn't properly mitigated, the fault will rest on the people with the power to make the decisions. That includes the governor, Senator Fitzgerald and Speaker Vos, every state legislator who didn't push their caucus leaders, and every elected official who didn't speak up. We urge every one of them to do the right thing. Instead of asking voters to risk their lives, we ask you to risk some of your political capital. Risk taking action even if it might get shot down in courts later. Risk being bold enough to demand action at all. Risk upsetting the status quo. Now is not the time to submit to political fears. This is an opportunity to do something monumental and make an actual difference, and people in Wisconsin could die if you don't.

Signed,

Wisconsin Voices
African American Roundtable
Alliance for Climate Education
Black Leaders Organizing for Communities
Freedom Inc
Hmong American Women's Association
Layton Boulevard West Neighbors
Leaders Igniting Transformation
Metcalf Park Community Bridges
Southside Organizing Center

Wisconsin Democracy Campaign
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