



October 2, 2020

Honorable Governor Andrew Cuomo, Chair
 National Governors Association
 444 N. Capitol St. NW, Ste. 267
 Washington, D.C. 20001

RE: The Impact on Voters with Rare, Serious and Chronic Diseases as a result of COVID-19

Dear Governor Cuomo:

As the 2020 general election approaches and the United States of America continues to battle the COVID-19 pandemic, the undersigned organizations encourage governors to take steps to ensure that the most vulnerable populations maintain the ability to exercise their right to vote. We thank you for all the steps you've taken so far to ensure that citizens have safe voting options, but more must be done to ensure the most vulnerable individuals are not disenfranchised. We represent tens of millions of patients throughout the country who are, or could be at, increased risk of COVID-19 infection and associated adverse health outcomes. Patients with serious conditions are currently very cautious about why and how often they leave their homes. To a greater level compared to the general population, patients with serious conditions have taken enhanced steps to work from home, utilize telemedicine rather than in-person doctor visits, and have friends or family purchase their essential items. It is important that states offer similar flexibilities for these patients so they can take part in the election process safely. It is important that in cases where rare, serious and chronic disease voters do decide to exercise their right to vote may do so in a safe manner. Finally, we recommend that officials establish procedures to protect voters during future pandemics.

Absentee Voting/Mail Voting/Designee

We recommend processes that make it safer for rare, serious, and chronic disease patients to vote from their homes this November. In response to COVID-19, at least 35 states have modified their

absentee/mail-in voting procedures.¹ We appreciate the work that many states have already taken to ensure voters, such as the patient populations that we represent, have the option of voting from their homes.

To ensure that members of the serious and chronic disease community are not disenfranchised in this election, states should consider allowing voters to assign a designee to deliver their ballot. As of July, ten states allow a family member to return a ballot for a voter, and 26 states allow the voter to designate someone to return their ballot for them, (e.g., family member, postal service, or agent).² Specifically, allowing a serious or chronic disease patient’s family member to deliver the patient’s ballot to a polling station will not only ensure that the patient’s ballot is counted but may also encourage new voter participation through improved accessible options. Further, allowing for hand delivery of a ballot by a designee could help to reduce the burden on the United States Postal Service (USPS).

Further, to the extent allowable, we recommend that states currently requiring a witness to be present when voting by absentee to waive such requirements throughout the duration of the pandemic. Currently, eleven states have enacted a policy that requires citizens to obtain a witness when deciding to absentee vote. Witnesses may include election officials, notaries, or people over the age of 18.³ As rare, serious and chronic disease patients take steps to socially distance, coordinating to request a witness could be an unnecessary burden.

Last, if not already implemented, we ask all states to allow voters to deliver their mail-in ballots at designated locations, such as ballot drop boxes. This will ensure voters will be able to ensure officials receive their ballot in a timely manner without having to send the ballot through the mail. Accordingly, this measure will help to reduce the burden on the USPS.

In-Person Voting Recommendations

A core component of the public health strategy to combat the spread of COVID-19 is “social distancing”—dramatically reducing instances in which individuals share the same physical spaces as others outside of their households, families, caregivers, or other essential interactions. Social distancing has proven to be a valuable method of slowing the spread of COVID-19. Therefore, it is important for everyone, but in particular for our constituency, that in-person voting is conducted with proper social distancing.

Therefore, several simple adjustments are available to decrease the risk of spreading COVID-19 among those voting in-person. Weather permitting, encourage polling place captains to open all doors and windows to increase ventilation; designating one or more poll workers to station outdoors so that

¹ “Changes to Absentee/Mail-in Voting Procedures in Response to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic, 2020.” Ballotpedia. Accessed August 17, 2020. [https://ballotpedia.org/Changes_to_absentee/mail-in_voting_procedures_in_response_to_the_coronavirus_\(COVID-19\)_pandemic,_2020](https://ballotpedia.org/Changes_to_absentee/mail-in_voting_procedures_in_response_to_the_coronavirus_(COVID-19)_pandemic,_2020).

² Taylor Dybdahl, and Lesley Kennedy. VOPP: Table 10: Who Can Collect and Return an Absentee Ballot Other Than the Voter, July 10, 2020. <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/vopp-table-10-who-can-collect-and-return-an-absentee-ballot-other-than-the-voter.aspx>.

³ Taylor Dybdahl. “VOPP: Table 14: How States Verify Voted Absentee Ballots.” National Conference of State Legislators, April 17, 2020. <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/vopp-table-14-how-states-verify-voted-absentee.aspx>.

curbside voting is reliable; and moving lines and even polling booths outdoors are some of the widely recommended practices.⁴

Education

Due to modifications to voting procedures this election, some individuals may be confused about the voting process as a result of these changes. Educational materials that make it easy for voters to understand the current voting by mail process in their area will ensure less confusion and greater participation. We encourage all governors, legislators, and election officials to utilize and partner with the patient community, as many of our organizations are currently working on education efforts with our constituencies on this subject. In particular, the use of social media platforms are low-cost, effective ways to spread messages about how to vote this year.

Future Elections

The above recommendations are important to consider and incorporate in future election planning for years to come. Much focus is on the November 3rd election, but many states will have subsequent elections before a vaccine or effective treatment for COVID-19 is developed. Even after the return of some sense of normalcy, patients with rare, serious or chronic conditions will continue to be cautious as a result of COVID-19 and future pandemics. It is necessary to continue protecting vulnerable populations during the upcoming election and future elections.

This November, the use of absentee and mail-in voting will undoubtedly be at an all-time high due to COVID-19. Currently, 34 states and Washington, D.C. operate under no excuse absentee voting. Five of these states receive auto mail-in ballots. In future elections, we recommend that states that do not have a “no excuse absentee voting” process ensure that chronic disease patients who want to avoid potential virus exposure are able to receive an absentee/mail-in ballot in their state.

Throughout the current pandemic, the USPS has been over-burdened due to greater use. States can learn from their experiences with the USPS during this election to put forward best practices that streamline processes. Rare, serious, and chronic disease patients benefit from greater access and flexibility offered by states in relation to voting. We ask that states keep this in mind in the future to ensure that mail-in ballots are mailed out to voters in a timely manner.

Thank you for your consideration of these recommendations to help the rare and chronic disease patients we represent. For more information or for answers to questions, please contact Chris Fox (cfox@diabetes.org) or Anna Hyde (ahyde@arthritis.org).

⁴ CDC Considerations for Election Polling Locations and Voters, June 22, 2020.
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/election-polling-locations.html>

Sincerely,

American Diabetes Association
American Kidney Fund
American Lung Association
African American Health Alliance
Arthritis Foundation
Association of Asian Pacific Community Health Organizations
Association of Diabetes Care & Education Specialists
Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America
Beyond Type 1
Coalition of Wisconsin Aging and Health Groups
Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, U.S. Provinces
Cystic Fibrosis Foundation
Diabetes Patient Advocacy Coalition
Empowering Pacific Islander Communities
Franciscan Action Network
Healthcare Leadership Council
Hemophilia Federation of America
Leukemia & Lymphoma Society
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
National Council of Asian Pacific Americans
National Council of Jewish Women
National Organization for Rare Disorders
National Psoriasis Foundation
Rural Health Association of Tennessee
The AIDS Institute
Wisconsin Immunization Advocacy Coalition

CC:

National Association of Secretaries of States
National Conference of State Legislatures
United States' Governors