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Testimony

Committee on House Administration Hearing on Voting Safety During a Pandemic

August 28, 2020

Good Morning Chairwoman Lofgren, Ranking Member Davis, and members of the committee. Thank you so much for the invitation to testify before you today.

My name is Julie Wise and I'm the Director of Elections for King County, Washington. King County is made up of 39 cities – ranging from our largest and the one you're probably most familiar with, Seattle, to suburbs, small towns, rural communities. I myself live on a small farm of about 10 acres, 10 miles outside of the nearest town of 12,000 and grew up in the small town of Enumclaw, about an hour southeast of Seattle in the shadow of Mount Rainier.

In King County, we have the most diverse zip code in the country and hear more than 170 languages spoken in our region. We are the home to tech companies, as well as farmers, artists and small businesses – and, most importantly from my perspective, nearly 1.4 million registered voters who care deeply about their community. I take the responsibility of ensuring that all their voices are heard very seriously – it's the duty that I've dedicated my life and my career to.

I've been an election administrator for twenty years and have worked on every single part of the process, both before and after we moved to vote-by-mail in 2009. That means I've worked polling places, worked the transition from predominantly in-person voting to vote-by-mail, and now manage elections for the largest vote-by-mail county in the country.

I'd like to start this morning by addressing some misinformation about vote-by-mail that's been circulating of late.

First, voting by mail is secure. Before we moved to vote-by-mail, we were often managing as many as 8,000 poll workers across as many as 600 polling places. Now, we process every single ballot at one location, our secure headquarters. Not only does this limit risk, it means I can directly oversee the entire operation. It means we can track and reconcile where every ballot is in the process. And it means the public and official party observers have complete transparency. All of our elections staff are highly trained, paid employees who swear an oath to uphold the sanctity of the election.



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We protect our operation with multiple layers of both physical and cybersecurity. Our facility includes both keycard and biometric controls; we have more than 50 security cameras; and we live stream our operations whenever we are processing ballots.

Second, voter fraud is almost non-existent. While we've seen lots of claims, often fueled by speculation and with little evidence, the reality is that we have many safeguards to prevent fraud in vote-by-mail systems. We ensure accurate voter rolls by working with other states through ERIC – the Electronic Registration Information Center – as well as working closely with the Department of Licensing, USPS, and the Social Security Administration. Our team even regularly checks obituaries.

In King County and Washington State, cases of suspected fraud are incredibly low. In 2016, King County Elections referred 17 cases of potential voter fraud to our Prosecuting Attorney's Office. That's 17 cases out of over one million ballots cast comparing data with 30 other states. That's a fraud rate of 0.00001%. The numbers from 2018 are very similar – we are currently in the final stages of investigating 29 cases out of 980,000 returned ballots. All of those cases appear to be voters who cast a ballot in two states, none are instances of a ballot cast for a deceased voter.

Third, the United States Postal Service is absolutely essential to democracy in a vote-by-mail system and I've found recent reports of removing mailboxes and lagging delivery times incredibly troubling.

What I can tell you about our experience in Washington is that we benefit from a decade-old relationship with our postal service partners. We meet regularly with the region's USPS team and coordinate on everything from mail pick up schedules to envelope design, making sure that every step of the way our ballots will travel through the mail stream quickly and reach their destination safely.

The good news is that in our August 4th Primary election, we saw normal delivery times for both our outgoing and inbound ballots. However, we view any threat to the postal service as an attack on our community's right to vote. I will be closely monitoring changes, meeting with USPS and our print and mail vendor to make sure we stay ahead of any issues ahead of the November 3rd election.

I know there has been speculation that ballot drop boxes aren't secure. Specially constructed of half inch thick steel, and weighing in at over 1,000 pounds, I can assure you that our 70 plus boxes are a safe



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and convenient way for voters to return their ballots. We even had one once hit by a school bus, and I can attest that the box, and its contents, were just fine. The school bus fared less well.

In King County, we have a drop box within a 3-mile radius of 96% of our registered voters. And in recent elections over half of our voters have used a drop box to return their ballot. They are emptied daily during the voting period, by trained staff in teams of two, complete with a comprehensive set of security procedures. Boxes are closed at 8 p.m. sharp on Election Day – not a minute later.

Finally, vote-by-mail removes barriers. I believe that my job is not only to conduct transparent and accurate elections, but also to remove barriers to voting. From creating a first-in-the nation partnership with a local philanthropic organization to provide community grants for voter outreach and education to adding service in new languages to partnering with the Seattle Seahawks to provide in-person voting opportunities, we've found ways to increase engagement and leverage our vote-by-mail system.

And we've seen results. King County reached 76% turnout in the 2018 midterm, and we have regularly eclipsed 50% in recent primary and local elections. This fall we're projecting 90% turnout, which is something I believe we could only accomplish with vote-by-mail. We hear from voters in every election about how grateful they are to be able to vote in such an easy, convenient, safe, and secure manner. They might miss the community of the polls, but boy do they prefer sitting down with their coffee and voters' pamphlet to mark their ballot.

Of course, we live in a different world now than we did just six months ago. And I am doing a number of things to make sure we are ready for the upcoming Presidential Election in light of COVID-19.

First, I want to underscore how critical the grant dollars we received through the CARES Act were. While we may just be the best set-up jurisdiction in the country to handle an election during a pandemic, there has been a lot to do to make sure that our voters and staff can stay safe and healthy while exercising their right to vote. We have set-up curbside and drive-thru vote centers and even opened for in-person service at the Seahawks Century Link Field.

Ballots must also still be processed in-person, on-site. Our ballot processing floor looks very different today than it did six months ago. Stations have been spread out and moved around to ensure proper distancing, partitions installed when six feet just isn't possible, face masks and shields and other PPE have been provided for all staff, there's more hand sanitizer on-site than we could have dreamed about before. Our staff are temperature checked when they arrive for work and we have worked out contingency plans for in case there is an outbreak among ballot processing staff. We just had 200+



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people in the building to process ballots from our August 4th Primary and I'm proud to report that we have not had a single reported case among our staff due to these precautions and a staff team who is taking their health and public health very seriously.

CARES dollars have allowed us to make all of these necessary changes to ensure that our voters can make their voice heard safely and our staff don't have to risk their lives to help make democracy happen.

Another change we're making, in light of concerns around USPS, is adding an Intelligent Mail Barcode to our return ballots so we can see where each and every ballot is in the mail stream. We already do that level of tracking for our outgoing ballots and now will be doing so for returned ballots as well. So when a voter calls and says "I stuck my ballot in the mail a week ago but I don't see it on the ballot tracker" – a key tool we make available for our voters to track their ballots through the process – we will be able to investigate and see when and if it was processed by USPS and when it is expected to be in our hands at Elections headquarters.

And we are pushing our voters more than ever to return their ballots early for this election. Early voting not only means that voters can avoid that last-minute rush on Election Day, it also helps with our workflow and helps us provide a clearer picture of results on Election Night and in the days following. The more ballots we have back early, the more will be included when we publish initial results after 8 p.m. on Election Day. It also means that our voters won't be in danger of missing the 8 p.m. deadline because they got caught at a red light or ended up having to work later than expected that Tuesday in November. Our message to them is 'rest easy on Election Day knowing that your vote is counted, and your voice heard.'

Over the last several months, my office has received dozens of calls and emails from other jurisdictions across the country about how to do vote-by-mail and do it well. The reality is that every jurisdiction already does some form of vote-by-mail – that's what absentee voting is. The challenge for these jurisdictions is how to expand their ability to handle a lot more mail ballots.

My first piece of advice is that everyone from voters to the media to campaigns need to be prepared that there will not be final results on Election Night and that's okay. To process mailed ballots in a secure way, it takes some time. In King County, it takes a day or two depending on volume for a ballot to move through the complete process from being marked as received to having the signature verified to being opened to being scanned for tabulation. Time is necessary for the checks, double checks, and



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triple checks that make vote-by-mail secure. We need to make sure these jurisdictions have the time and space necessary to count those ballots, without having the election's validity being questioned.

If possible, jurisdictions should also consider expanding drop box or drop-off options for voters to return their ballots. This allows for more ballots to be back in the hands of election officials on Election Day or in the days before, relieving some pressure on those critical days following Election Day, as well as providing voters with options and can help clear up any confusion about WHEN to mail a ballot back as some jurisdictions require the on-time postmark and others require the ballot to be received by Election Day.

Finally, it is key to work with partners, stakeholders, community groups, and more to get the message out to voters about what the rules and deadline are, how to return their ballot, and to get their ballot returned early. Getting important information into the hands of voters is critical to ensuring that all eligible voters can exercise their right to vote.

Of course, all of these efforts require resources. And while I'm lucky to oversee elections in a jurisdiction that is already set-up for success, I hear regularly even from other Washington State counties that they need resources to make sure voting is safe and accessible. If I had additional resources available I would be channeling those into PSAs to help address some of the misconceptions and misinformation I noted above. Thank you again for inviting me here today to share my perspective and experience in vote-by-mail elections. I am happy to answer questions.