

**To: Subcommittee on Elections of the Committee on House Administration**

**From: Inajo Davis Chappell, Esq.**

**Date: October 6, 2020**

**Re: Written Testimony on Challenges in Election Administration - Separating Fact from Fiction – Hearing on “Voting Rights and Election Administration: Combatting Misinformation in the 2020 Election”**

Thank you to the Honorable Marcia L. Fudge, Chairperson of the Subcommittee on Elections, for the invitation and opportunity to testify today. Thanks also to the other distinguished Members of the United States House of Representatives who are present.

I am currently a member of the Cuyahoga County Board of Elections, where I have had the privilege of serving as a board member for 13 years, and for 6 of those years as immediate past board chair. I am also a former member and chair of the Ohio Board of Voting Machine Examiners. My testimony and comments today reflect my personal opinion and viewpoint. I am not here in any representative or official capacity as a member of the Cuyahoga County Board of Elections. I am a nongovernmental witness and, although I do not speak here today either for the Cuyahoga County Board of Elections or my fellow board members, my thoughts, conclusions and statements are informed by my experiences in election administration as a member of the Cuyahoga County Board of Elections and as an active voter in Ohio.

In the 13 years I have worked in elections administration (including 3 prior Presidential elections), I have never witnessed the kinds of falsehoods being disseminated about the integrity of our elections process that we are seeing this Presidential Election cycle. The lie that there is rampant voting fraud has been tamped down somewhat, as there has been no such evidence of voting fraud in our county --the largest voting district in Ohio with more than 850,000 registered voters. But, the campaign to discredit the integrity of our elections process is on the upswing, and it is shameful.

Despite our best efforts as elections officials to separate fact from fiction about voting and the elections administration process, we continue to hear statements that “the system is rigged,” and voting by mail is corrupt with great potential for voter fraud. But the latest untruths being circulated in this election cycle around vote by mail being fraught with problems have not diminished the numbers of voters requesting vote by mail ballots. By the end of September, 2020, our Board of Elections has seen almost 3 times the number of vote by mail ballots requested, as compared to the numbers in September, 2016. I attribute the surge in vote by mail requests to the unprecedented pandemic, and to the fact that this 2020 election is, arguably, the most significant Presidential Election in our lifetimes. It is a *bona fide* election fact that voters in Cuyahoga County, Ohio have been voting by mail successfully since 2006.

Notably, in June, 2020, Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose hosted a Webinar for elections officials that focused on Mis/Disinformation. He has also published both a video and 2-page Disinformation Overview in recognition of the severity of the elections misinformation problem.

These materials highlight the goals of a mis/disinformation campaign and describe the focus of such campaigns as “picking divisive issues” (such as race, religion and gender), “planting fake news” along with “amplifying messages via extreme fringe groups,” “organizing protests to incite disarray,” “using internet and social media to launch mass influence campaigns” with the goal of subversion, civil unrest and the creation of public discord. The Ohio Secretary of State’s informational materials further point out that minority groups are targeted by these disinformation/misinformation campaigns to “exploit grievances,” “build distrust and cynicism toward the voting process,” and “discourage voter participation.” Finally, our Ohio Chief Elections Officer further correctly identifies foreign bad actors such as Russia, North Korea, China, and Venezuela, who are engaging in these disinformation campaigns.

Unfortunately, the misinformation and disinformation campaigns aimed to confuse and scare voters are also being accomplished by domestic bad actors. Much of the disinformation is actually, and sadly, being promoted by President Trump and the White House. President Trump and other domestic bad actors have unfairly demonized the vote by mail process and undermined public confidence in the manner in which vote by mail ballots are requested, issued, mailed, and returned for processing and tabulation. Voting by Mail is safe, and messaging to the contrary needs to stop. Election disinformation is all propaganda no matter its origin. Its purpose is also clear --- disruption of the 2020 Presidential Election; erosion of public trust, voter confidence, and our democracy. Action must be taken to dismantle these misinformation campaigns and to assist boards of elections in fighting with counter messaging.

As elections officials, we are committed to correcting misinformation and disinformation as best we can and in a number of ways.

First, in response to the fabrications around the vote by mail process, we began and are implementing a new initiative to encourage voters to vote by mail to maximize voter safety. To that end, we have rolled out a “Vote from Home” program. I have submitted several pictures with my testimony that show the manner in which the Cuyahoga County Board of Elections is trying to separate fact from fiction; to show that voting by mail is safe and secure, despite recent public statements being made to discredit and undermine this method of voting. These pictures of our Myth Buster messages posted on social media speak to a variety of topics and are geared to give voters accurate information about elections and the voting process. All local boards of elections should be funded sufficiently to create messaging to counter disinformation activities.

Voter education and community outreach are critical in improving voter confidence and engagement. Our Board of Elections has ramped up efforts to connect with voters as way to combat misinformation and disinformation efforts. We communicate regularly with over 300 community partners, including municipalities, non-profit organizations, and our library systems. Although we have only 3 employees in our Community Outreach Department, these individuals organize and present at events that educate and engage voters. Despite the pandemic, our staff has conducted more than 221 events so far this year.

It is important to increase staffing and the number of these events so that voters are able to receive accurate information on voter deadlines, vote by mail, early voting, and the like. 3 staff members for 850,000 registered voters is hardly enough and I am certain all local boards of elections and

the voters they serve would benefit from additional resources to address the problem of election disinformation.

In addition to community outreach, our Cuyahoga County Board of Elections has a robust website that provides information on all-things-voting. We have vastly improved our social media presence and are working to expand these capabilities. We are currently active with Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn and are working to set up Instagram. Our Board of Elections utilizes the program “Hootsuite” -- a social media management platform—that gives us a kind of dashboard, and supports social network integrations for Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and YouTube. Because of the privacy settings on many programs, we are not always able to identify every negative or false comment made regarding elections and voting but, if we are tagged in any of the applications, we can and do quickly respond. We have a dedicated staff member, who monitors all of the social media applications and handles posting to the various sites.

One new program we were proud to implement is a voter engagement session held by a bi-partisan team, consisting of our Board of Elections Director and Deputy Director on Facebook Live. The session is held 10-15 minutes every Wednesday and Friday at 12 Noon to provide information and updates on the 2020 Election; i.e. relevant deadlines, answering questions, addressing any erroneous information brought to our attention. We post pertinent information on all social media outlets weekly (and more often, if necessary); all in an effort to counter the inaccurate and dangerous disinformation messaging being circulated in both traditional and social media.

In thinking about ways that Congress might act to improve elections administration and help local boards of elections combat misinformation, I would suggest that additional funding be authorized to allow for more robust community outreach and voter education programming, hiring of additional staff to work with voters, and earmarking of dollars for improving social media capabilities of local boards of elections.

In conclusion, thank you for convening this hearing and for allowing me this opportunity to testify. I appreciate the time you have given me to speak about ways we are trying to combat election misinformation/disinformation campaigns in Cuyahoga County, Ohio. I am hopeful the information I shared with you today will be helpful as you consider ways to stop election misinformation and to restore voter confidence in the elections process.