



128 DORRANCE STREET, SUITE 220 - PROVIDENCE, RI 02903
(P) (401) 831-7171 (F) (401) 831-7175

September 25, 2008

Dear Board of Canvassers:

In light of the significant voter turnout expected at this November's general election, our organizations are writing to urge your Board to take steps to make voters in your community aware of their polling place location, particularly if that location has changed since 2004, the last Presidential election. We believe such action is essential so as to ensure that qualified ballots are counted to the maximum extent possible.

As you know, a person who goes to an incorrect polling place has the right to cast a provisional ballot there. However, under current state Board of Elections' regulations, a qualified voter who casts such a ballot will have *only his or her votes for federal offices counted*. All of their votes on statewide elections, statewide referenda, and city or town-wide elections and referenda are thrown out, even when there is no question about their qualifications and residence in the municipality where the ballot was cast.

As a result of this state policy, potentially thousands of voters who go to the wrong polling place in their community in November will find most of their votes disqualified. We therefore consider it critical that voters be made aware, in the most direct manner, of their correct voting district in order to reduce this type of mass disenfranchisement. Your agency is in the best position to help voters in this regard.

While the extent of the problem obviously varies greatly from community to community, it is our understanding that, on the whole, polling location changes are not at all uncommon. For instance, according to a *Providence Journal* article that appeared on the day of this year's March presidential primary, municipalities had closed more than 80 polling places since the 2004 primary. Changes in polling location due to the closure or combination of voting districts understandably lead to some voter mistakes, but the confusion is especially pronounced when a voter is assigned a different location while their old polling place remains open. It is not difficult to see why a voter might end up at the wrong location under those circumstances.

We recognize and appreciate the various efforts undertaken by both local Boards of Canvassers and the state to address this issue. But advertisements in newspapers and the availability of the "polling place locator" on the Secretary of State's web site only go so far in helping voters. Particularly for the poor and elderly, those efforts are likely to be insufficient.

These particular classes of voters are doubly harmed because they are also the ones least likely, due to time or transportation difficulties, to be able to get to their correct polling place after they show up at the wrong one.

In raising these concerns, we also recognize that some Boards, in fact, send out specific polling location information to certain classes of voters, such as those whose polling places have recently changed. We greatly appreciate that effort as well. But the reality is that thousands of residents may be voting for the first time since the last Presidential election four years ago, and they will not be aware of any polling changes that have taken place since that time.

For these reasons, and in light of the record turnout expected in November, we strongly urge your Board to take steps to individually notify voters of their polling place location by sending out postcards with this information before the upcoming election. To the extent this is deemed too costly or otherwise burdensome, ***we would encourage at a minimum that you send notices to those voters whose polling location has changed since the 2004 elections.***

We hope you will give this request your favorable consideration. We trust you agree with the goal that it is designed to achieve – reducing, as much as possible, the unnecessary disqualification of legitimate votes cast by qualified electors this November. Thank you in advance for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

Christine Lopes
Executive Director
Common Cause/RI

Steven Brown
Executive Director
RI Affiliate, ACLU