House State Government Committee
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Room 205 Ryan Office Building

Testimony of Secretary Pedro A. Cortés
Pennsylvania Department of State

2008 Primary Election Preparations

Chairwoman Josephs, Chairman Baker and distinguished members of the House State Government Committee:

Good morning. Thank you for the invitation to appear before the Committee to discuss the steps the Department has taken to be ready for the Pennsylvania primary on April 22.

This is a historic primary, as Pennsylvania is in a position to have a voice in at least one of the major party nominations. More than 8.27 million Pennsylvanians are registered to vote in the primary, and counties are still entering voter registration forms postmarked by the March 24 deadline. Between January 1 and March 30, 2008, more than 155,959 new voters have registered and 146,625 voters changed parties.

Although the presidential race dominates much of the media coverage, Pennsylvanians will also focus on the crucial races for state House and Senate, Attorney General, Auditor General, Treasurer and Congress. Over 1,400 candidates filed nomination petitions.

My testimony will cover the following election-related matters:

- Voter education, collaboration with counties to address critical issues, and poll worker training;

- The Statewide Uniform Registry of Electors and voter registration; and

- Election Day activities.

Voter education, collaboration with counties to address critical issues, and poll worker training

In terms of education and outreach, the Department has issued news releases and provided interviews with media to explain the qualifications and process to register to vote, as well as the requirements of a closed primary. A special message and news release was issued to members of our armed forces explaining the process for military and overseas voters. The Department also reached out to university presidents to communicate guidelines for college voters, as many of the students may be voting for the first time. In addition, the Department is launching *Ready.Set.Vote.*, an interactive voter education campaign that features multimedia advertising, outreach efforts and a soon-to-be launched revised version of our interactive Web site, VotesPa.com. The campaign's goal is to ensure that Pennsylvania voters are familiar with voting processes, rights and technology.

With regard to addressing critical issues, the Department continues its close collaboration with Pennsylvania's 67 counties. The Department has identified these issues based on feedback from the County Commissioners and Election Directors, prior Pennsylvania elections and 2008 primaries and caucuses across the nation. Key issues focus on managing a potential record number of voters in the electoral process and voting system security.

Beginning shortly after Super Tuesday, February 5, the Department began to communicate to the counties recommendations for handling large volumes of registration applications as well as high voter turnout. Sufficient staffing throughout the entire process is key, as well as ordering ample supplies of absentee ballots and optical scan ballots in the counties that require them.

Given the volume of new registrations and the heightened interest in this election, the Department has discussed with County Election Directors on various occasions the need for contingency planning to meet the increased demand for provisional ballots as well as the importance of sufficient emergency ballots. In addition, counties are customarily reminded to be prepared to handle unexpected polling place emergencies, such as power outages, inclement weather, fires, water damage and flooding.

Voting system integrity and security is the next critical issue that the Commonwealth and counties continue to address. The Department has recommended public viewing of election system preparation and testing, as transparency of the process is a key component of instilling voting system integrity. Establishing a well guarded and documented chain of custody and providing physical security of voting systems before, during and after the election also are critical steps to secure the electoral process.

Some counties have reassessed their voting system needs since their last election. For the primary, 51 counties will use DREs, 12 counties will use optical scan, and four counties will use both DREs and optical scan systems.

I want to take a moment to clarify any misconceptions about the Rendell Administration's position on voter verified paper records. Some individuals have suggested that voting systems in Pennsylvania should include voter verified paper records. The Department has certified four optical scan systems that provide such a paper record. The counties ultimately choose whether to procure an optical scan system or a DRE. The Department is not opposed to DREs with a paper record capability, provided such systems meet constitutional and statutory requirements. This includes ensuring that a person's vote is secret and cannot be viewed by others in a way that would divulge who cast the ballot. We have yet to examine a system with a paper record that meets constitutional and statutory requirements for secrecy of the ballot.

The large volume of voters also magnifies the importance of poll worker training. Historically, issues that have arisen during election day have been primarily due to human error. Adequate poll worker training can minimize errors and ensure that the elections are administered smoothly. This year, the Department of State produced a new DVD titled, "Election Officials Training Program." This video was made available to all counties to supplement their training efforts.

The Statewide Uniform Registry of Electors and voter registration

The second matter I would like to discuss is the status of the Statewide Uniform Registry of Electors, more commonly referred to as SURE. SURE is the centralized voter registration and election management system used by the counties and the Department to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the Commonwealth's voter registration records. All 67 counties have used SURE since 2006.

Over the last two years the Department has worked diligently to increase the system's capacity to process records. The enhancements continue to be implemented. Considering the staggering number of voter registration applications being entered at this time, the SURE system is performing at its capacity. Please understand that all first time registrants are also to be checked through a separate process controlled by the Social Security Administration. The availability of that process is not within the control of the Department.

The Department continues to develop services that provide greater access to available technology and data. These services are called "SURE portals." The public portal allows voters to find their own registration and polling place information on the Department's Web site. The county portal enables elections staff to view and certify voter registration statistics, enter and track provisional ballots and enter election night returns. The Department's innovative use of technology gives counties increased flexibility for more employees to enter voter registration data. This additional data entry capability is helping counties complete the task of entering new voter applications.

Election Day activities

Finally, I will address the Department's Election Day activities. The Department has staff members who are experts on specific topics. This staff will be ready and available during Election Day to provide assistance to the counties and to the public on issues ranging from basic questions to complex legal issues. Given the higher volume of activity anticipated for this election, the Department of State is taking the additional step to make available communication liaisons to serve the counties on the day of the primary. The liaisons will be trained by Department and county staff and will be on-site in each county to provide an additional communications channel between the counties and the Commonwealth during a likely high turnout primary.

The Department also continues to improve its reporting of unofficial election results after the close of the polls. For the first time, a direct interface for electronic reporting using the SURE county portal will be employed by 17 and possibly more counties. In addition, a team of Department staff will work with county staff to expedite the reporting of election returns on the Department's Web site.

Based on all of these preparations, I am confident the Department and the counties will be well prepared for the primary. I am also confident we will have a well-informed electorate.

In closing, I thank you for your interest and support of the Department's election preparation efforts. We look forward to continuing to work with you and with the counties to ensure fair, accurate, accessible and secure elections for the voters of Pennsylvania.

Thank you for your invitation. I welcome your questions at this time.