



**TESTIMONY BY CHICAGO LAWYERS' COMMITTEE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS
BEFORE THE ILLINOIS HOUSE ETHICS & ELECTION COMMITTEE
REGARDING HOUSE BILL 4838 - VOTE CENTER PILOT PROGRAM
MARCH 22, 2022**

Submitted By:

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Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights appreciates the chance to express our concerns with Illinois House Bill 4838 (HB 4838), a bill instituting a vote center pilot program. We thank the Champaign County Clerk's office and Reform for Illinois for the opportunity to discuss vote center proposals and the benefits and drawbacks of such a model. We would be glad to serve a resource to other stakeholders who are evaluating the civil rights repercussions of such election systems. We are submitting this brief written testimony after trying unsuccessfully to participate in today's subject matter hearing on HB 4838, as our understanding is that today's hearing was postponed.

I. Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Election Protection in Illinois

Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights is a non-profit, non-partisan organization that has been working for the past 50 years to advance racial equity and economic opportunity for all. We provide legal representation through partnerships with our 40 member law firms. We collaborate with grassroots organizations to implement community-based solutions that advance civil rights. In our voting rights practice area, we work to reduce barriers to voting and civic participation, especially in communities of color and low-income communities. We aim to ensure that all eligible voters are able to cast ballots, that their votes are not diluted, and that the system does not undermine their fundamental right to vote and right to choose their elected officials.

Chicago Lawyers' Committee advocates for expanded voter access for all communities, regardless of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic, or disability status. A major component of our work is Election Protection, the nation's largest non-partisan voter protection program, which operates the 866-OUR-VOTE hotline and supports companion lines at 888-VE-Y-VOTA, 888-API-VOTE, and 844-YALLA-US. We help disenfranchised voters in a variety of settings, in collaboration with local election authorities. Our work puts us in a unique position to understand voter access barriers, investigate and remedy problematic practices, provide information on voting rights, and advocate for necessary reforms.

Every election, we answer voters' questions from across Illinois over the phone and in-person, including voters in Black and Brown communities. We have answered thousands of voter questions and resolved numerous problems at the polls, including helping many individuals who

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are trying to determine their polling place and take other steps to ensure that they are able to vote and have their vote counted fairly. We are proud to also serve as a resource to state and local election authorities, including helping to troubleshoot with voters when questions arise about changed polling places or difficulty accessing the polls. Incidentally, through the Election Protection hotline 866-OUR-VOTE, we also assist voters in Indiana, one of the most restrictive election systems in the country and the home of multiple vote center jurisdictions.

II. Voter Concerns About Elimination of Precinct-Based Polling Places

In community conversations over the years regarding vote center proposals, Chicago Lawyers' Committee regularly hears from voters who are concerned about attempts to *minimize or eliminate the use of precinct-based or neighborhood polling locations*. Especially given the current grave threats to voting rights, especially for people of color, voters are understandably concerned about any reduction and consolidation of polling places. Before the Illinois General Assembly advances vote center proposals such as the pilot program outlined in HB 4838, it is crucial for lawmakers to take both of the following steps:

- (1) add specific safeguards to avoid adverse effects such as disenfranchisement, even if unintended disenfranchisement, and
- (2) engage in a robust community engagement process with the voters of Illinois before drastically altering their voting experience and access options.

III. Racial Equity Concerns with Vote Center Proposals in Illinois

Below is an initial list of racial equity concerns with a vote center model in Illinois.

- a. Different voters have different experiences accessing the ballot and making their voices heard. To discern which voters might still need access to precinct-based polling places, it is essential to take a hard look at the disparities faced by voters of color and other marginalized communities. Depending on demographics such as race, gender, age, location, languages spoken, health conditions, and other characteristics of our electorate, vote center models are likely not a one-size-fits-all solution to modernizing our election system.
- b. Voters must have robust opportunities to learn about vote center proposals and have their input on potential pilot programs meaningfully considered ahead of time. At the very least, voters and non-partisan civic organizations in Champaign County and all other areas impacted by vote center proposals should be consulted about the bill details and potential amendments, particularly non-partisan civic organizations who engage voters of color. Chicago Lawyers' Committee would be glad to provide ideas of community groups that should have the opportunity to weigh in on this bill. Of course, the Champaign County Clerk's office would have even more ideas of community contacts, particularly given all their ongoing efforts to engage voters.



- c. Given the legal requirement of at least one universal polling place in each election jurisdiction for 2022 elections (10 ILCS 5/11-8) without eliminating precinct-based polling places, this election year is an opportune time for state and local election authorities to gather and release to the public an analysis of utilization of vote centers, precinct-based polling places, and other voter access options. It will be vital to gather community input on such analysis to determine whether the data tells the whole story, which voters' needs are being met by which facilities, and which voters are getting left behind, again even if unintentionally.
- d. While vote-by-mail is a necessary option that all voters must have available to them, some voters and communities prefer to vote in person on Election Day, feel more comfortable doing so, and have the right to make that choice. Voting behaviors in the unique circumstances of the 2020 presidential election during pandemic conditions, including dramatically increased rates of vote-by-mail, might not be indicative of community members' awareness of or comfort with voting by mail in all elections going forward.

We request the Committee to also refer to Reform for Illinois' written testimony submitted today, which summarizes several additional voting rights and racial equity concerns regarding vote center proposals in Illinois.

IV. Conclusion

Illinois voters have insisted time and time again on the importance of a menu of options of how, when, and where they can register and vote. This is the time to increase voting options and opportunities for civic participation, not take them away. We urge the Committee and the legislature to apply caution in considering vote center proposals and meaningfully engage voters before making the decision to eliminate in-precinct polling places.