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**Subcommittee on Elections
Committee on House Administration
Modernizing the Election Registration Process
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Introduction

Good afternoon Chair and members of the Committee. My name is Katie Blinn and I am the Assistant Director of Elections for the State of Washington. I am here on behalf of Washington Secretary of State Sam Reed. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss Washington's *positive* experience with online voter registration.

Background of Online Voter Registration

As directed by the federal Help America Vote Act, Washington deployed its statewide voter registration database in January 2006, on time and on budget. After obtaining approval from our Legislature, we deployed an online version of voter registration in January 2008 that has become very popular with both voters *and* election administrators.

The applicants are providing the same information that has historically been provided on a piece of paper, only they are instead providing it on a screen. Washington's online program allows a person with a Washington driver's license or state ID card to register without having to print out or mail in a form. It is entirely online. As part of the program, we confirm with our state driver's licensing agency (in most states called the DMV or the DOL) that that the name, date of birth, and driver's license number provided by the applicant are accurate. We then obtain a digital image of the applicant's signature from the licensing agency.

Popular with Voters

The public already conducts a significant amount of personal and professional business online. For example:

- Banking
- Taxes
- Communicating with friends, family and colleagues

- News, politics and sports
- Purchases
- Renewing a driver's license or car tabs
- Filing legal briefs in court

The public *expects* to be able to take care of their business online and that expectation is only going to increase over the next 10-20 years.

How much the public already expects this service was illustrated the day we launched this program. After months of development, one Monday morning in January 2008, we quietly turned the online system on and added the icon to our website. Out of caution, we had not issued any press releases or promotional material. But within minutes, the registrations filed in at a pace of 500 a day. Later in the week, we moved forward with a public affairs program and promoted it, and the rate of online registrations *tripled*. Now keep in mind that this was right in the middle of the media-heavy Presidential Primaries, the same week as the New Hampshire Primary, but the point is that the public was already going to our website specifically looking for this service. The public was ready to use it.

By the end of 2008, over 158,000 people had registered online.

Popular with Election Administrators

The online voter registration system has also been very popular with election administrators. It has reduced their workload because the information comes in electronically. They don't have to spend so much time manually entering the information from paper forms. This also reduces the risk of mistyping a voter's name, address, date of birth, etc.

Once we began to receive inquiries from other states, we put together a handout that includes additional information. I have provided this handout as part of your materials.

Key Elements of our Development

There are a few key elements that made our legislation and development a success.

1. Keeping the legislation free of detailed requirements allowed us needed flexibility in development. This flexibility will allow us to continue to innovate and improve the program, both to take advantage of improved technology and to make the program more user-friendly. We are already implementing major revisions to make the program more user-friendly and accessible after only a year and a half.
2. The online system is only available on the Secretary of State's website. Voter registration drives by political parties and advocacy groups are a wonderful way to get voters engaged, but those campaigns often fail to maintain their websites once a big election is over. We also cannot grant campaigns and interest groups access to the state driver's licensing database, which is critical function of this system.
3. We obtain the voter's signature from our state licensing agency. Therefore, *online* registration is only available to those who *have* a Washington State driver's license or

state ID card. These applicants have come into a state licensing office in person to prove their identity, provide a signature, and have their picture taken. If the applicant provides an incorrect or nonexistent driver's license, the program will not allow the applicant to advance to the next screen and finish the application. While it might initially seem that this form of registration is *more* subject to fraud, it is actually *less* because *it* controls whether the user can advance through the application. Applicants who do not have a Washington driver's license or ID card can continue to register using a paper form.

Proposed Legislation

We strongly urge the Committee to include explicit language in the legislation that *the States* have final authority over voter registration eligibility, and implementation requirements. This is critical since there is such a spectrum of both technology and voter registration laws. Online voter registration can be achieved without requiring States to change their overall voter registration laws. For example, States must have authority to obtain a signature. A *paper* application would certainly not be accepted without a signature.

The 15 day deadline is especially concerning for states that have broad scale absentee voting. A 15 day deadline falls *after* ballots are prepared and mailed. Online registrations must stop before the absentee ballots are mailed because many people who are already registered and simply need to *update* an address end up submitting an application online. Ballots can end up going to the wrong address, or people end up being double registered, which can lead to double voting. This *impairs* the accuracy of the voter registration rolls. We feel confident that an online system can be implemented without mandating a particular voter registration *deadline*.

Finally, the legislation appears to eliminate a policy established by Congress 15 years ago that has been very successful. Election-related mail is returned to the elections office because a voter moved or even died. Once it is returned, the voter goes on "inactive" status. The voter remains on inactive status through two federal general elections, so *at a minimum* through a Presidential election cycle. After this period, which is 2-4 years, the elections office is authorized to cancel what is now a clearly *invalid* registration. The proposed legislation repeals that authority to cancel old registrations. This change would make it extremely difficult to have accurate voter registration rolls because election officials would be forced to maintain registrations for people who moved or died years and years ago. This is another provision that can simply be removed from the bill without diminishing the legislation's overall purpose.

I have provided you a copy of the letter that Secretary Reed sent the Committee last month explaining some of these concerns with the proposed legislation.

Closing

Secretary Reed and I thank you for the opportunity to share our experience and we are happy to assist the Committee as much as we can. Thank you.