

**Remarks by Philadelphia City Commissioners Chairwoman Lisa Deeley to the Pennsylvania
Senate Special Committee on Election Integrity and Reform**

April 20, 2021 9:00AM

Good morning and thank you to the members of the Senate Special Committee on Election Integrity and Reform for inviting me to share my remarks and experience with you this morning.

My name is Lisa Deeley, and I am the Chairwoman of the Philadelphia City Commissioners, the three-member board of elected officials who oversee elections and voter registration for the City of Philadelphia.

I grew up around elections. I witnessed my mother as she became actively involved in local politics and community building, and when I turned 18, I ran for and was elected by my neighbors to be the judge of elections at our local polling place. Being able to assist my neighbors exercise their right to vote, to see the community come together on Election Day, instilled values in me that shaped me to be who I am today and have led me to where I am in life. I was elected to office by the voters of Philadelphia in 2015 and was sworn into office in January of 2016. In December of 2017, I was voted Chairwoman of the City Commissioners Office.

I know it sounds like a cliché and far from the world we currently live in, but voting is more than a right - it's a revered act that has created meaningful change and has brought individuals together – even those who may not share political viewpoints. This sentiment may be easy for some to forget or to simply not believe, considering the state of our current political climate, in which hyper partisan politics rule and civility seems to be a relic of the past. The fact is this: voter registration and elections are not partisan issues. Election officials such as myself take pride in implementing elections that are non-partisan, transparent, and that encourage citizens to make their voice heard at the ballot box. This is true for all elections, including THE election that has brought us here today: the Presidential Election that occurred on November 3rd, 2020.

When I first ran for Commissioner, I thought I knew almost all there was to know about elections, but the last five plus years have exposed me to the aspects of voting and elections that are seldom seen by the average citizen. A momentous amount of time and effort goes into implementing free, fair, and secure elections every six months in a county the size of Philadelphia. Every year, our jobs seem to be getting harder and harder, and our responsibilities expanding, which is why we have seen so many elections officials retiring or leaving in the last year. To borrow an analogy from a former official from Cooke County, Illinois: running elections used to be like wedding planning. You just needed to make sure the same things happen on cue every six months. You process voter registrations, programmed and sent out the machines, printed poll books, counted and published results, picked up the machines, and onto the next election. All of that changed around Bush v Gore in 2000. Since then, every year, election officials are asked to take on a new career and wear a hat for each role. We are expected to be computer scientists, cyber security experts, handwriting experts, print and mail house operators, logistics coordinators, physical security experts, and epidemiologists. These jobs are sometimes brought on by circumstance. Russia's actions in 2016 were a serious wake up call to the importance of cyber security and the impact that COVID-19 has had on running elections and society has been

unprecedented. All too often, these changes come as rushed, unfunded mandates from the state. The legislation that created significant changes and updates to Pennsylvania's elections, Act 77 and Act 12, did not include any additional funding. The House fiscal note stated that counties could implement Act 77's changes using existing funding. It leads one to wonder if anyone read the legislation, understood the impact of the changes, and also made it easy to believe that no election officials were consulted in the crafting of these laws. The legislature needs to do a better job of researching their proposals, listening to election officials, and providing funding, so the cash strapped counties do not have to bear all of the costs. I sit on the newly formed Election Law Advisory Board and I am dismayed when I read in the news that many of the, quote, reform proposals floating around Harrisburg have not been run by the advisory board. The Election Law Advisory Board includes several county commissioners and election directors, as well as legislators with crucial experience, and I hope that the legislature and governor listen to the advice that will be coming from this board.

Funding has not kept pace with the modernization of elections, meaning staff have taken on a larger than realistic amount of duties and responsibilities to ensure that the elections run as smoothly as possible. Because changes are being implemented at breakneck speeds, while we still have to hold elections, many of the major projects you see coming out of our office are the work of just a handful of people. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in early 2020, the city was forced to make drastic cuts that resulted in our department being flat funded. To add fuel to the fire, the legislature refused to allow the pre-canvassing of the 350,000 plus mail ballots. We could not start counting until election morning. The 2020 Primary taught us that the public, the media, and even some legislators, blamed election officials for any delays in counting. We faced a significant amount of additional mandates from the state and demands for services from voters without any additional funding from the state or city. The deck was stacked against us. For the 2020 Presidential Election, we were fortunate enough to receive private funding that allowed us to, among other things, purchase vital equipment and hire temporary staff to work twenty-four hours day to count the ballots as quickly as possible. Still, it took us until Saturday to count enough ballots for the AP to call the Presidential race. Pennsylvania's Treasurer race took even longer. Election officials in PA deserve modernized procedures such as pre-canvassing, and we should join other states that understand how important pre-canvassing is.

The 2020 Presidential Election gave election officials another new job, either Super Hero or Super Villain depending on who you supported for President. That election proved to be unprecedented in its scope, its environment, its focus on election departments, and the level of anxiety that even average citizens had just watching the news in October and November. The months before, during, and after this election have proven that misinformation is the biggest threat to our democracy, acting hand in hand with the violent polarization of our society. As we have seen, Pennsylvania is one of the leading states for citizens being arrested for storming the Capitol on January 6th. It is no secret why these hearing have been called, and that is to investigate the widespread lies surrounding Pennsylvania's election in November.

While these lies might stroke the egos of some, serve as prime fundraising content for others, and/or light a fire under an individual's future political aspirations, they are tearing the country apart. If it were not for the quick actions of law enforcement, the ballot processing center that we set up at the Pennsylvania Convention Center could have been a site of where these violent words became reality. Election officials and their families around the state were threatened, including in our department. The

political director of the Republican Party confronted me with a cell phone outside on the street. The video was posted to Twitter and later to Gab and Parler, as well as other fringe social media sites. I would like to read you just some of the things that people were saying about me: "I want to beat one of these people to death in the worst way ever.", "that is a "dead politician walking, right there", "Start executing these f-ing traitors.", "Just shoot her.", "I usually don't condone violence against women but when traitors start destroying my grand children's' future, then f it, they're fair game." They posted a screen shot of my office address, which prompted us to remove all of our office addresses from our website. After these threats and violent discourse started circulating, police protection was assigned to me - I did not request them, they were assigned. They followed me wherever I went, I couldn't drive my car, they drove me. I am not the Mayor, I run elections, and I never would have believed that I would need a cop to accompany me at all times, even if its just to stop at WAWA. To this day, I still feel the need to check my mirrors to see if anyone is following me home.

There are a significant number of citizens in not just our Commonwealth, but all over our country, who currently believe they cannot trust their government to administer an election that enables them to exercise their right to vote in an impartial and unbiased way – a requirement which all election officials must legally follow, and do. The seriousness of this issue and its consequences cannot be overstated. By making elections, voting, and election results political, we are toying with the foundation of our democracy, what this nation was founded on. This is not an issue that will go away with the next news cycle; it looks to only be getting worse. If we can step back for a moment, think of the greater good, and commit to serving our constituents to the best of our ability, we can act to restore Americans' faith in the electoral process and one of their most precious rights as American citizens, the right to vote. Let me be clear: the 2020 election was not stolen, it was conducted freely, fairly, and transparently. One party won the President and the Attorney General races, while the other won the Auditor General and Treasurer races.

Call me idealistic, but I still hold out hope that we can change the conversation surrounding voting and elections to ensure that the average voter is not debilitated with anxiety over how election day operations will play out or if their vote will be counted. For many, election days of the past bring about warm memories of a neighborhood coming together to catch up and wish each other the best. I strive to do more than simply meet the duties that are expected of me as an election official. Of course, I will continue to work tirelessly so that every eligible citizen has the right to vote. But really, I want to go beyond the simplest expectations and responsibilities. My goal is to allow the voters of Philadelphia, and of the Commonwealth, to experience an election day that acts as a source of familiarity and brings about sentiments of respect for our neighbors, and a reminder of the value for community. It has been done before, and if enough people with the power to make change – people such as ourselves – want this experience for their constituents, we can make it happen.

I would like to state the most pressing needs that Philadelphia City Commissioners Office requires to operate at our full capacity and to serve the Commonwealth to the best of its ability:

1. We require better than adequate in terms of funding. The funding we have received from the city and state has been inadequate. To ensure that Pennsylvania is considered a place in which voting, and elections are taken seriously and respected, funding is desperately needed. The

scope of duties that our department undertakes is astounding, and if more of the legislature understood the range of this scope, they would agree that the need for more funding is more than evident and justified, it is imperative.

2. I urge you, again, to draft legislation that would make the secrecy envelope a non-vital part of the vote by mail process. Currently, if a voter does not use the secrecy envelope, their vote is not counted, and I frankly find this to be blatant voter disenfranchisement. We should be encouraging people to vote and making the process simple, not tedious, prolonged, and filled with the potential for errors that result in a vote not being counted.
3. Enact a pre-canvass period to begin at-least three weeks before election day. This will allow counties to open and scan ballots at a reasonable, less stressful pace and have enough results in so that winners and losers of elections can be clearly known on election night, like our nation is accustomed to. Every county still has to standup an in-person election and it is a tremendous burden to divert needed staff from this task because of the need to begin processing mail ballots.
4. I request that elected officials and representatives such as yourselves, and your colleagues in the Senate and House, be open to crossing the aisle and learning more about election administration and all it involves. Both parties seem to have a half-painted picture of what it is that election officials are tasked with and how we do it. I welcome you to meet with me, ask me as many questions as you'd like, even if they're uncomfortable. We need to at least attempt to understand where the other is coming from and realize that the right to vote is not to be taken lightly nor toyed with. I commit to listening to your ideas and inquiries with an earnest attitude, and a willingness to partner with any official who has enough respect for Pennsylvania, its voters, and their government to restore and reinforce the message that citizens can and should trust their democracy and not fear they are being denied one of their most fundamental human rights – the right to vote.

Thank you all for your time and for hearing my remarks.