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AIDS ORGANIZATIONS WARN STATE OF OHIO THAT VOTER CHALLENGES WILL RESULT IN VOTER INACCESSIBILITY

Election Day challenges may cause long waits and discourage eligible voters

CLEVELAND, OHIO -- Today the AIDS Taskforce of Greater Cleveland, with support from a national coalition of AIDS organizations, demanded that elections officials provide full and equal access to people living with disabilities. The large number of voter registration challenges promises a situation where voters will experience lengthy delays standing on line to be able to cast their ballots. For a person living with a disability, such a wait will make voting difficult or impossible.

"We believe the State of Ohio has a duty to ensure that voters on November 2 can cast their ballots without unreasonable delays," said Earl Pike, Executive Director of the AIDS Taskforce of Greater Cleveland. "For people living with HIV and other disabilities, a long wait may be physically impossible, and illegal interrogations about physical or mental health status may be so offensive that they limit participation."

A coalition of national AIDS organizations signed on to the letter, including the National Association of People with AIDS (NAPWA-US), Housing Works, POZ Magazine, Community HIV/AIDS Mobilization Project (CHAMP) and The AIDS Institute. "The whole world is watching Ohio in this election," said Paul Feldman, Public Affairs Director of the National Association of People with AIDS. "For people facing major health challenges, voting is a declaration of the intent to survive. We must guarantee that everyone has that opportunity."

A recent nationwide poll conducted by the National Organization on Disability and Harris Interactive found that 21 percent of voters with disabilities were unable to vote in past presidential or congressional elections because of barriers faced either at, or in getting to, the polls. Additionally, 22 percent of survey respondents stated that poll workers challenged their eligibility to vote. (Visit the National Organization on Disability Web site at www.nod.org for complete poll results.)

In a letter to Ohio Secretary of State J. Kenneth Blackwell, and a separate letter to Cuyahoga County Elections Director Michael Vu, the coalition of groups requested that reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities, including people living with HIV, are made at each and every polling place throughout the state. Specifically, people with disabilities who feel they are unable to wait on line must be allowed to move to the front of the line to vote without delay. Also, poll staff must be advised to refrain from denying any qualified individual who accompanies a person with a disability to serve as a designated ballot assistant.

Additionally, in order to manage reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities as well as to attend to the overall disruptions in polling places resulting from a higher-than-usual number of voter registration challenges, polling places throughout the state must be staffed at higher-than-usual levels. Additional poll personnel will be required to do line management to ensure people with disabilities can vote without delay as well as to ensure that undue delays are avoided for all voters.

Anyone who has a disability-related problem at a polling place should call the Ohio Legal Rights Service at (800) 282-9181, where legal staff will be standing by and can speak directly to election workers. Voters can also call the Election Protection hotline at (866) OUR-VOTE, {866-687-8683}, a national hotline staffed with attorneys and voting rights advocates.