

Michigan Election Reform Alliance.org - Testimony

Statement to the House Committee on Ethics and Elections

February 19, 2008

From: Jan BenDor, Ypsilanti, MI, 734-484-1744, jan@bendor.org
Philip T. Shepard, East Lansing, MI 48823, 517-332-0761, shepard@acd.net

Jan BenDor is Deputy Clerk in Pittsfield Township, Washtenaw Co., MI, a statewide coordinator of MERA, and Chair of the MERA legislative committee.
Phil Shepard is Professor Emeritus at Michigan State University and legislative coordinator for MERA.

Testimony:

The Michigan Election Reform Alliance applauds the effort to remove unnecessary barriers to the right to vote. HB 4774 and 5739 represent small but important steps in improving the ability of Michigan citizens to register to vote in person or by mail with the full verification of their identity provided by an authorized voter registration official. We must note, however, that neither of these bills would be necessary if the legislature were to enact election-day registration, following the lead of eight other states.

HB 4774 enhances both the letter and the spirit of the National Voter Registration Act, heretofore only partially honored by Michigan's limited provisions for voter registration in public agencies. Authorizing any sworn local election official to perform voter registration makes financial sense, by extending the use of existing resources at no added cost. Local clerks' voter registration services are vastly underutilized, while the Secretary of State is now in the process of closing Driver's License branches around the state. The bill is also feasible technically, now that the SOS has made the QVF street index available to local clerks for statewide lookup, allowing an in-person registration official to directly route a new registration to the proper jurisdiction office.

HB 5739 partly relieves the Catch-22 for first time registrants who register by mail and cannot under current requirements vote by absentee ballot in their first Michigan election. They now must vote in person to validate their identity before a sworn official. The person who registers by mail, however, is generally a person whose work or study has already required them to be away from home, and will almost certainly require them to be absent from the polls on a subsequent election day. HB 5739 would help the absent Michigan registrant who is still in Michigan by authorizing any local clerk to validate the identity of the new voter. MERA urges that this bill be made broader, in order to help the Michigan resident who is absent from the State of Michigan. A person on work or study assignment in another state should be able to satisfy the in-person identification requirement at the office of another state's clerk. This would completely eliminate the Catch-22 for absentee voters who register for the first time by mail. Such a provision would provide the same rights for all Michigan residents temporarily living out of the state that federal law now provides for Michigan residents living over the border in Windsor.