

September 17, 2013

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Voter Advocates Criticize Latest Restrictive Elections Bills

(Columbus, Ohio) – The Ohio Fair Elections Network, a coalition of national, state and local fair elections advocates, criticized the latest election bills introduced by Representative John Becker (R-Union Township). House Bill 263 narrowly sets early voting hours from 8:00 a.m. - 4:30 p.m., and prohibits early voting on evenings and weekends. A second bill, H.B. 266, prohibits county boards of elections from using their own discretion to send absentee ballots to all registered voters in the county. In addition, H.B. 266 prevents public assistance agencies from sending unsolicited voter registration applications, a possible violation of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993.

The *limits on the hours* for early voting proposed in H.B. 266, is compounded by the *limits on the days* for early voting proposed in H.B. 263, which would cut early voting in half from 35 days to 17 days. Camille Wimbish of Ohio Voice said, “Early voting is very popular in Ohio. In the last weekend before the 2012 election, over 60,000 votes were cast across all counties.” She questioned, “Why would Rep. Becker attempt to restrict the days and hours of early voting, when it will certainly make it more difficult for voters to have access to the ballot box?”

Rep. Becker’s claim that the proposed cuts to early voting will result in cost-savings is also in dispute. Franklin County Board of Elections Member Zach Manifold stated, “The convenience and flexibility of early voting has allowed counties to save a tremendous amount of money through precinct consolidation. This legislation will reverse those cost-savings, as fewer people voting early will require more election staff, poll workers, and voting machines on Election Day.” He noted, “Additionally, this legislation will force small counties that only needed part time hours to meet the early voting demands of their voters, to spend significantly more taxpayer money to stay open full-time.

Others voiced concerns about the impact of preventing public assistance agencies from mailing voter registration applications to low income citizens. Norman Robbins of the Northeast Ohio Voter Advocates observed, “This prohibition only exacerbates the disparity between applicants at the Bureau of Motor Vehicles, where applicants must refuse a pre-filled registration form, and low-income applicants for public assistance benefits, who must fill out a complete form, often in the middle of a family crisis.” He noted, “This bill would increase the number of costly provisional ballots by making changes-of-address more difficult for the very people who move the most.” He added, “Not only does H.B. 266 send a harmful message that voting rights are not equal among Ohio’s poor, but the bill likely violates federal law.”