



December 10, 2021

Lt. Governor Kevin Meyer
PO Box 110015
Juneau, AK 99811-0001

Dear Lt. Gov. Meyer:

Thank you for the phone call this summer to discuss how we can work collaboratively to improve voting access for Alaska Natives in both rural and urban Alaska. I appreciate the openness and the opportunity to continue to work together.

After our conversation about HB 96/SB83, specifically addressing your inquiry into the option for full vote by mail for communities 750 and less, NPA reached out to a handful of communities across the state, from Southeast and Southwest Alaska to the North Slope, and to communities of varying sizes to gather their thoughts on the possibility of *only* voting by mail in their community. With the exception of one community that had less than 100 residents, each person at the city/IRA office expressed their desire to continue to vote in-person, or have a community discussion with the state prior to the implementation to ensure all voices are heard.

Recommendations we have after these calls include: 1. Adding parameters around when the director can initiate a vote-by-mail and require direct consultation with the community. Some communities may be open to the idea, but need to be consulted with, rather than imposed on. 2. Implement a more robust poll worker training program throughout the year that takes place in communities across rural Alaska, first concentrating on the areas with the hardest to employ poll workers. 3. Increase pay for poll workers, this will help to recruit and retain poll workers. 4. Work with the Tribal leaders, community members and local government to identify the community needs to carry out an election. 5. Reducing the size of the vote-by-mail only request - currently HB96/SB83 would impact over 270 communities;

We encourage language in the bill to reflect all of the recommendations listed above, in addition to reaching out to the communities this legislation will affect to gather additional feedback and ideas on how to continue to improve access to voting for all our communities. It is important that for policies that will greatly impact our communities that there is direct feedback and support for any changes made that could impact the ability for people to vote.



Throughout the year NPA reaches out to communities, individuals and Tribal leaders across the state to listen and learn what is happening in their communities. Voting is a topic that many discussed with us, especially during the last election cycle.

During the 2020 general election, many individuals and communities struggled to receive their absentee ballots in the mail. While voting by mail is an important tool for many, delivery can be unreliable in rural areas as it is difficult to keep post offices open and staffed, and air carriers can delay mail drops if it is not profitable enough for them to fly on a certain day. These factors make the maintenance of a hybrid system critical.

Community-wide issues:

- **Village of Clark's Point:** During our outreach calls on 10/27/20 we uncovered that no one in Clarks Point had received their requested absentee ballot in the mail. We spoke to the Tribal Administrator, who assured us that applications had been submitted by multiple elders (she had helped directly).
- **Mertarvik** residents did not receive any primary ballots.
- **Newtok** did not receive voting supplies for the primary election.
- **Beaver** is currently without a post office. There may be other communities that are without a post office as well.
- **Chalkyitsik's** poll worker hired by the Division of Elections moved, leaving the village without an in-person polling option and without an election official
- In **Wales** many were afraid of exposure to COVID-19 and did not vote in person, but did not vote by mail, making turnout very low.

Individual issues:

- Man in **King Salmon**, struggled to get an absentee ballot through the mail.
- Man in **Kalskag**, requested an absentee ballot online but never received it. He tried calling the Divisions of Elections office, but his call could not go through due to bad weather.
- Woman in **House District 39**, applied for an absentee ballot but had technical difficulties receiving it and was unable to vote in the end.
- An Anchorage resident was in her hometown of **Beaver** during the primary election and had difficulties finding postage stamps to mail her ballot in because the community is without a post office.



Lack of staffed or open government offices such as a post office or DMV in rural communities also can inhibit residents from obtaining a secondary form of ID (ex: drivers license or state ID card). Requiring witness signatures and extra forms of voter identification, coupled with not guaranteeing ballot curing or the acceptance of Tribal IDs, also puts many voters at risk of not being able to participate in elections.

Testimonies:

- Man from **Seldovia** said that we need more voting accessibility, in particular helping people get IDs so that they can vote.
- Man from **North Pole** said he is concerned that a lot of people can't get ID's, so there needs to be a way to help people register to vote. He suggested linking hunting licenses or Tribal IDs to voting.
- Man from **Tok** asked where he should sign and date his absentee ballot. When he called the division of elections, they gave two answers - 1) date it near the signature...when he expressed concern that that would invalidate the signature, the DOE rep said 2) date it in the place for the witness affidavit. Voter was confused, and said that something like this could prevent other people from voting as well.

We also learned from many that in-person voting works well when communities are small. Village election officials that we spoke to expressed that in-person voting was successful in 2020 because everyone was familiar with their voting routine - the Tribe or city also posts information about where/when/and how to vote, and makes sure that everyone they know makes it to the polls.

Testimonies:

- Woman from **Hughes**: Had to help run the election because the person who normally does was quarantined. Got everyone to vote except 1 person.
- Man in **Scammon Bay**: Voting in person works well because it is such a small village.
- Comments made in different regions: Elders in communities that don't have access to ballots in Alaska Native Languages rely on assistance from those who can translate.

Over the years we have worked closely with communities and individuals to hear their personal stories about voting, talking about what has worked well and what has not worked well. The more we learn, the better we can do to improve the system we have to ensure that every Alaskan has the same access to voting. We have taken this information and shared it with legislators so



we can help to address voting issues and the need to increase access to voting. Some of the recommendations include:

- More robust training for poll workers should be done year-round to ensure that communities have multiple people able to be poll workers and help to train others in their communities as well.
- Raising wages for poll workers.
- Permanent absentee voting so people do not have to apply for a ballot every year - this could help take care of some of the application issues if it is not required each year.
- Pre-paid return envelope for ballots.
- Include the acceptance of Tribal IDs for voting.
- Allow ballot curing. We know mistakes can happen, but that does not mean your vote should be thrown out. There needs to be an opportunity for the voter to fix the mistake, cure their ballot, and allow it to be counted.
- Eliminate witness signature on absentee ballots.
- Accessibility for Indigenous language speakers to have access to ballots and voter information in their Native languages.
- Election/voting information that is written in an accessible manner - simplifying the language used so that there is less confusion.

We also need to ensure there are multiple early voting locations and available in every community, including at the Alaska Native Medical Center (ANMC). We had confirmation from the Division Director that there would be an early voting location at ANMC and understand that covid created some complications for this to happen in 2020, so we encourage continued conversations with ANTHC and SCF to find an accessible voting location on the medical campus so those who are getting care away from their home still have the opportunity to vote. Additionally, this location would be beneficial for all Anchorage residents as it's a central location that is utilized by many residents for various medical and other services.

We understand that covid caused a lot of confusion and lockdowns were another complicating factor. We heard from a number of Alaskans who did not know if they could leave their homes to vote when the community was in lockdown. More information needs to be shared with people across the state on protocols and ensure they have access to a ballot. Information on the process and who is on the ballot has also been identified as a barrier or a reason for individuals not voting - the voter guide is a large document to upload for slower internet speeds in rural Alaska, we



would encourage you to work with the local and Tribal leaders to get printed election information and voter guides to Tribal offices in advance of the election. Over the years there have been numerous reports that voter guides were not received, working with the Tribal leaders can help be another resource and a place people turn to with questions.

As we continue to hear concerns and ideas from Alaskans across the state, we will continue to share information and work with you and the Division of Elections to help increase access to voting across the state. At the same time, we need to ensure that measures to decrease access and increase barriers to voting are not implemented. We encourage any changes happening to the voting process be talked about publicly and outreach is done with our Tribal leaders across the state.

We strongly urge you to reach out to communities to have conversations as many did not know about HB 96/SB83 that would create a vote by mail only option. It is important to have open dialogues and hear directly from the communities this bill would affect. If the communities do not support this legislation, we urge you to review the different options that can be done to improve elections across the state. We also encourage you to go through two reports that specifically address vote by mail in rural Alaska:

Alaska Native Voting Rights

<https://www.usccr.gov/files/pubs/2019/09-19-AK-SAC-Voting-Report.pdf>

Perceptions of Universal Ballot Delivery Systems

https://pubs.iseralaska.org/media/d2ea4bda-7817-4e0c-a6a6-ab86ded14a75/2018_06-PerceptionsOfUniversalBallotDeliverySystems.pdf

These reports highlight that rural residents prefer the vote-in-person option and the current option to request absentee ballots to vote-by-mail, mail delivery and delays are of notable concern with potentially disenfranchising rural voters, the state needs to abide by section 203 of the Voting Rights Act if it moves forward with vote-by-mail only, and encourages the state to collaborate with rural communities in addressing difficulties with voting.

Additionally, NPA would like to understand further the reasoning behind the inclusion of voter identifiers and have some immediate cautious reactions, but would be interested in learning more about why the division would need the extra identification.



Again, I appreciate you reaching out to me and willingness to work together on solutions to address voter access issues. I hope that we can connect again before the legislative session to find compromises in the legislation that has been introduced by you and others in the legislature. Please feel free to reach out to me and the NPA team anytime.

Gunalchéesh/Háw'aa/Quyana/Mahsi' Choo/Baasee'/Maasee'/Dogedinh/Thank you,

Kendra Kloster

Kendra Kloster

Executive Director

Native Peoples Action

kendra@nativepeoplesaction.org

907.957.6076