



**Hartford Foundation for Public Giving Testimony in Support of
Senate Bill 005, An Act Concerning Increased Opportunities for Absentee Voting, Safe and
Secure In-Person Voting and Voter Registration**

Senate Bill 820, An Act Concerning A State Voting Rights Act

Government Administration and Elections Committee

March 26, 2021

Good afternoon Senator Flexer, Representative Fox, Senator Sampson, Representative Mastrofrancesco and distinguished members of the Planning and Development Committee. The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving is grateful for this opportunity to submit written testimony **in support of Senate Bill 005, An Act Concerning Increased Opportunities for Absentee Voting, Safe and Secure In-Person Voting and Voter Registration and Senate Bill 820, An Act Concerning A State Voting Rights Act.**

The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving is the community foundation for the 29-town Greater Hartford region. As a community foundation, we manage approximately \$1 billion in assets, in 2020, the Foundation distributed a record-breaking \$52 million in grants to promote equitable opportunity for all residents in our region. Made possible by the gifts of generous individuals, families and organizations, the Foundation has awarded grants of more than \$837 million since its founding in 1925.

As part of our efforts to dismantle structural racism and improve social and economic mobility for Black and Latinx residents of Greater Hartford, the Hartford Foundation supports **civic and resident engagement** in our region.

Community voice and leadership is a priority for the Hartford Foundation, one that runs throughout each of our strategic priorities. Our commitment to civic engagement may take the form of voting, participating in local government, volunteering or sharing ideas on how public resources could be used to make our community a better place. Resident engagement efforts seek to develop resident leadership and opportunities for collective action. The Foundation believes that it is vital that policy decisions are informed by a diverse group of residents who are impacted by the actions at City Hall and the State Capitol. In doing this work, we hope to enhance inclusive opportunities for residents of our region to create positive change.

In 2018, the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving launched its first nonpartisan voter registration initiative for Greater Hartford. Known as Get Out the Vote (GOTV), the objective was to reach out to populations least likely to participate in federal, state and local elections: young adults, Latinx and Black residents, justice-involved residents, individuals with developmental disabilities and people living in high poverty neighborhoods. Thirteen community-based nonprofits successfully registered over 1,000 new voters and received 1,500 pledges to participate in the 2018 elections. Building off lessons learned from the 2018 effort, the following year, the Hartford Foundation awarded 20 grants

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totaling \$448,400 over eighteen months to support voter engagement in 2019 and 2020 and activities to promote Census participation. This past summer, amidst COVID restriction requirements, the Foundation provided another five grants to support socially distanced census outreach and voter engagement activities.

The Hartford Foundation remains committed to raising up community voice, such as through participation in the electoral process, recognizing the vital role community engagement plays in creating and sustaining more vibrant communities. As the community foundation for Greater Hartford, we believe we have a role to fill in helping local nonprofit organizations deliver the education and outreach efforts that encourage people to register, learn about the issues that affect them and cast their ballot on Election Day.

It is for these reasons the Foundation offers its support for **Senate Bill 005, An Act Concerning Increased Opportunities for Absentee Voting, Safe and Secure In-Person Voting and Voter Registration**. Among the proposals included in Senate Bill 005, is a provision to direct the Commissioner of the Department of Motor Vehicles to provide online voter registration applications to qualified residents applying for motor vehicle licenses or license renewals. This will significantly expand the registration rate of Connecticut residents eligible to vote in local, state and national elections which will encourage increased voter participation in our state.

Another valuable provision in this bill would ensure that eligible public high school students have the information they need to register and vote in elections. We know that young adults continue to vote at significantly lower rates than their older peers. The proposal would allow local registrars of voters to make presentations to eligible students each year at their schools and also have registrars work with principals to provide students with written information on voter registration and participation on the fourth Tuesday of September. By engaging students directly, Connecticut can ensure that more of our young adults take advantage of this right, have their voices heard and establish lifetime habits around engagement.

The Foundation endorses the bill's inclusion of Election Day as a state holiday. We also support the bill's provision requiring employers to provide two hours of paid time off during employees regularly scheduled work on Election Day and special election days. We know that many residents, particularly adults in low-income working families, have limited flexibility to go and cast their votes on Election Day. By making Election Day a holiday, more eligible voters will be able to cast their ballot without the fear of missing work, losing pay or possibly losing their jobs.

The Foundation supports the bill's provision to ensure that eligible adults with developmental disabilities are registered to vote and can have a legal representative provide them with any necessary assistance as a means of helping to ensure that all Connecticut residents can participate in the electoral process.

The bill also includes important changes to ensure that individuals returning to the community after incarceration are adequately informed on their eligibility to vote and the process and procedures available if they wish to have their voting rights restored. As an organization committed to assisting returning citizens, the Foundation recognizes that voting is another way to ensure that previously incarcerated residents have the ability to fully participate as members of our communities.



At a time where our politics have sometimes turned violent, it is an unfortunate commentary that the state would need to ensure that individuals do not seek to intimidate or incite violence during elections. But as we saw with the events on January 6, the polarization of our country has created potentially deadly threats to our right to have our votes cast and counted. It is for these reasons that we offer our support for the bill's inclusion of language to prohibit individuals from carrying firearms within 200 feet of a polling place.

In addition, the Foundation offers its support of the proposal's requirement that in districts where there are high concentrations of non-English speakers, that ballots be provided in the languages spoken by the majority of these residents in order to ensure they are able to cast an informed vote.

The Foundation is pleased that Senate Bill 005 includes procedures to simplify the process of obtaining absentee ballots by phone or online, including that provision that allows an individual's electronic signature from the Department of Motor Vehicles to be used when submitting absentee ballot applications online.

With one of the highest turnouts in state history, more than 650,000 people safely and conveniently cast their ballots by taking advantage of the availability of no-cost, postage-paid, absentee ballots. This is not to say these efforts didn't face significant challenges, including placing a strain on local registrars of voters who had to contend with counting an unprecedented number of absentee ballots. However, despite these issues, hundreds of thousands of people were able to vote safely by mail.

The Foundation also offers its **support of Senate Bill 820, An Act Concerning A State Voting Rights Act** which includes detailed procedures and remedies to afford all citizens equal access to representation in our democracy. Modeled after Voting Rights Acts in California, Washington and Oregon and similar efforts underway in New York and Virginia, the Connecticut Voting Rights Act would expand voters' private rights action against voter suppression and improve transparency and assist election administrators.

The Foundation is eager to partner with legislators and advocates to support efforts to ensure that all residents have a voice on critical issues and the solutions that are responsive to and beneficial for our entire community.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact our staff at policy@hfp.org or 860-548-1888.