

**April 17, 2019**

**Testimony of Amber F. McReynolds in Support of HB 115:**

**Adding a Permanent Absentee Ballot Choice for Alaska's voters**

Dear Co-chairs Fields, Kreiss-Tomkins and Members of the State Affairs Committee

1. I am providing this testimony both in my personal capacity - as an expert in the field of election administration - and currently as Executive Director for the National Vote At Home Institute, a nonprofit nonpartisan organization which is focused on improving the voting experience for voters across the country and implementing convenient voting options to include effective ballot delivery systems (commonly known as ballots by mail) along with in-person voting options.
2. I was qualified as an expert witness in the field of election administration, in the Civil Action No. 17-02016 (RC), U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia (2017) and Gessler v. Johnson, 2011CV6588, Denver District Court (2013). I also provided amicus curiae testimony in the recent Georgia case 1:18 – cv – 04776-LMM Martin, Bowers et al v. Kemp.
3. Until August 15, 2018, I was the Elections Director for the City and County of Denver, Colorado. I administered elections in Denver for 13 years and have worked in public policy and administration for over 16 years. I served as the Director of Elections for the past 7 years, Deputy Director of Elections from 2008 to 2011, and Operations Manager/Coordinator from 2005-2008. Denver has approximately 500,000 registered voters and conducts 2-4 elections each year. The elections include municipal general and municipal run-off, school board, special district, primary, general, presidential. The State of Colorado conducts all federal and state elections by mail ballot.
4. My relevant educational and professional background is as follows:
  - a. Masters of Science – Comparative Politics, London School of Economics & Political Science, 2002

b. Bachelor of Arts – Political Science and Speech Communications,  
University of Illinois, 2001

Professional Certifications:

- a. Certified Elections/Registration Administrator (CERA), Election Center (2010 – Present)
- b. Certified Colorado Election Official (2007 – Present)

5. In my role as the Director of Elections in Denver, I focused on continual process improvement which includes implementing innovative solutions to improve the voter's experience. During my tenure, the Denver Elections Division earned national awards from the Election Center and the National Association of Counties for Ballot TRACE (a first-in-the-nation ballot tracking, reporting, and communication engine), iAPP (iPad Accessibility Pilot Project), and eSign (a first-in-the-nation Digital Petition and Voter Registration Drive Application). Denver has also been recognized by the International Centre for Parliamentary Studies and received International Electoral Awards for Ballot TRACE and eSign. In addition, the Denver Elections Division has released other innovative solutions including the Denver Votes mobile application, enhanced contextual and behavioral marketing strategies to encourage civic engagement, interactive customer service platforms and implemented a new voting system in 2015.

## **Rationale for supporting HB 115**

HB 115 bill has my full support, and I recommend it receive yours for the following reasons:

1. It is good for voters
2. It is good for elections officials
3. It is good for democracy

## **Good for Voters**

Today in Alaska, all voters have the option of voting “absentee” without having to provide an “excuse.” This places the State squarely in the mainstream of current policy nationally, as 32 states do not require a specific reason for a voter to receive their ballot by mail.

However, there is an increasing movement to supplement “no excuse” absentee with “permanent absentee” provisions for all voters. Eleven states (AZ, CA, CO,



HI, MT, NJ, OR, UT, WA, WI) of those 32 already provide that convenience to their voters, with more states considering it in this current legislative session.

The benefit to voters is, having decided to “vote at home,” they do not need to remember to reapply for a mailed-out ballot for every election or every year. They get their ballot delivered to them for every subsequent election automatically, unless they move or change their mind. This provides voters not only with convenience, but also with a small “d” democratic nudge every election. The arrival of their ballot reminds voters that there is an election a few weeks out and encourages them to pay attention and participate. This is particularly important in local elections, special elections and primaries, where voter turnout is often a factor of 2x-4x lower than in a general election.

### **Good for Elections Officials**

Today in Alaska, elections officials and administrators must process absentee ballot requests from many of the same voters, election after election, year after year. That duplication of effort is clearly wasting vital resources that could be directed to other requirements. HB 115 will help simplify and streamline their work, saving money and personnel. By allowing voters to sign up for permanent absentee status, elections officials would see a reduction in paperwork and administrative impact across their organizations.

At the same time, the use of permanent absentee list voting has been proven to be highly secure, as Alaska has seen with its current no excuse policy. With the issues surrounding voter mail address maintenance well-executed, the system will be both fair and verifiable.

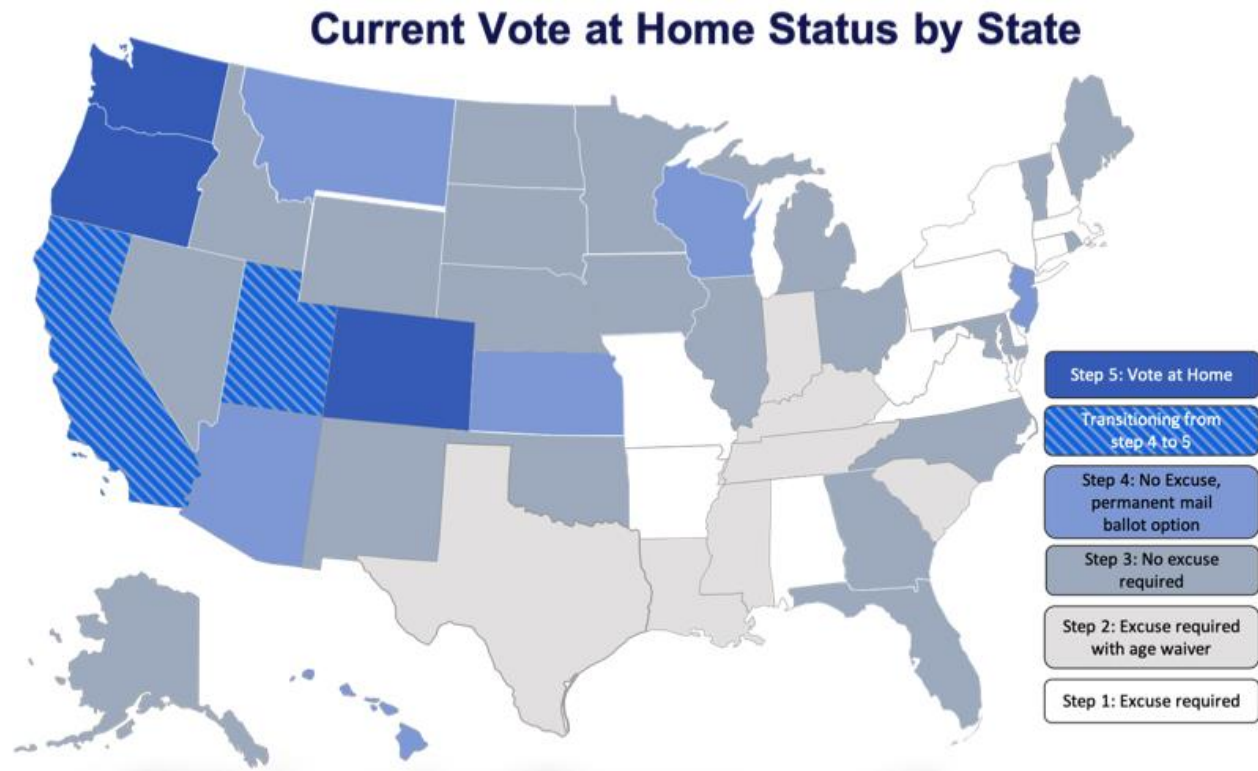
### **Good for democracy**

Anything that reduces friction in the process of elections tends to increase voter engagement and turnout. And allowing voters to not have to explicitly request an absentee ballot election after election, year after year, certainly reduces friction.

Under separate cover, you can access our Policy and Research Guide which provides much more depth on this subject at: [www.voteathome.org/guide](http://www.voteathome.org/guide)

In the meantime, here are a few of the most relevant elements from that document:

First, is a map showing which states support which of five basic categories of mailed-out ballots. Alaska is at Step 3 (no excuse) today.



Next, compare that map to the one below showing voter turnout in the 2018 mid-terms. Notice how much turnout correlates with higher availability of mailed-out ballots, independent of whatever local election issues / enthusiasm there might have been in any particular state.

Note: VAH stands for the three 100% mailed-out ballot states (CO, OR, WA). But the “permanent absentee” states of Montana and Wisconsin witnessed similar impact by having more voters with their ballot in hand.

## Turnout in the 2018 November election

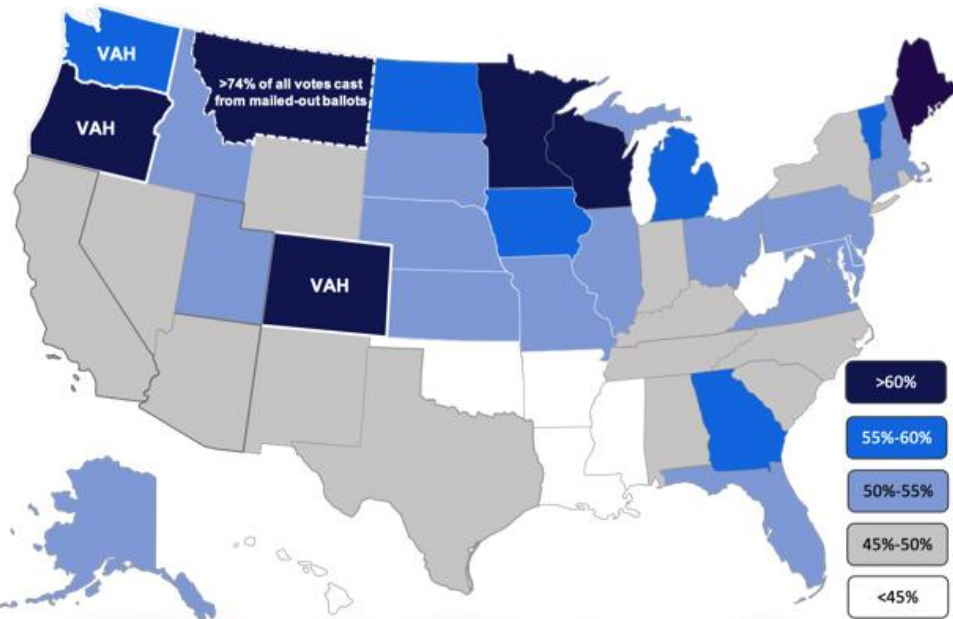
### Ranking by % turnout

- #1: MN – 64.2%
- #2: CO – 63.0% (VAH)
- #3: MT – 62.0%
- #4: WI – 61.7%
- #5: OR – 61.5% (VAH)
- #6: ME – 60.2%
- #7: WA – 58.9% (VAH)

For consistency, all data uses voting eligible population (VEP) as basis for % calculation

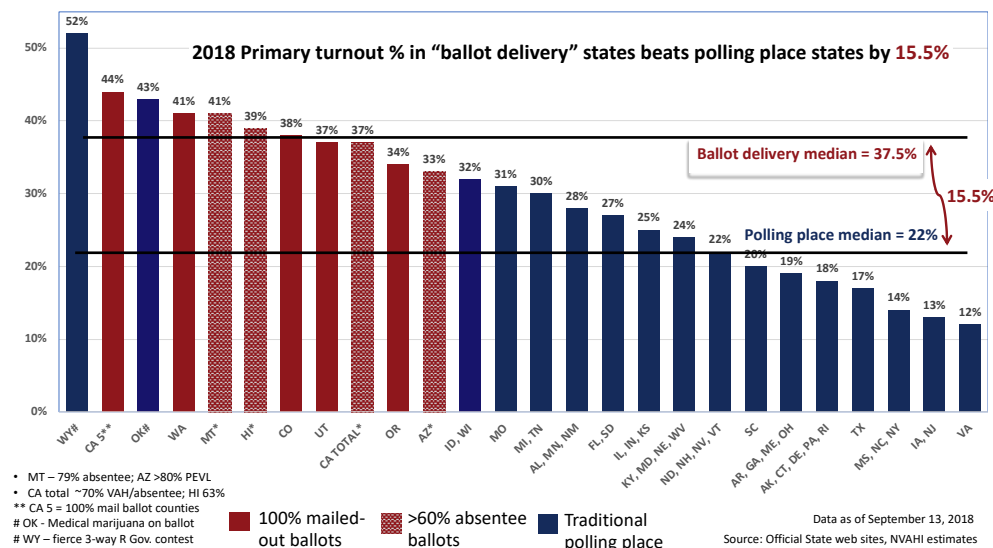
Data as of 1/1/2019

Sources: The US Election Project, State web sites, NVAHI estimates



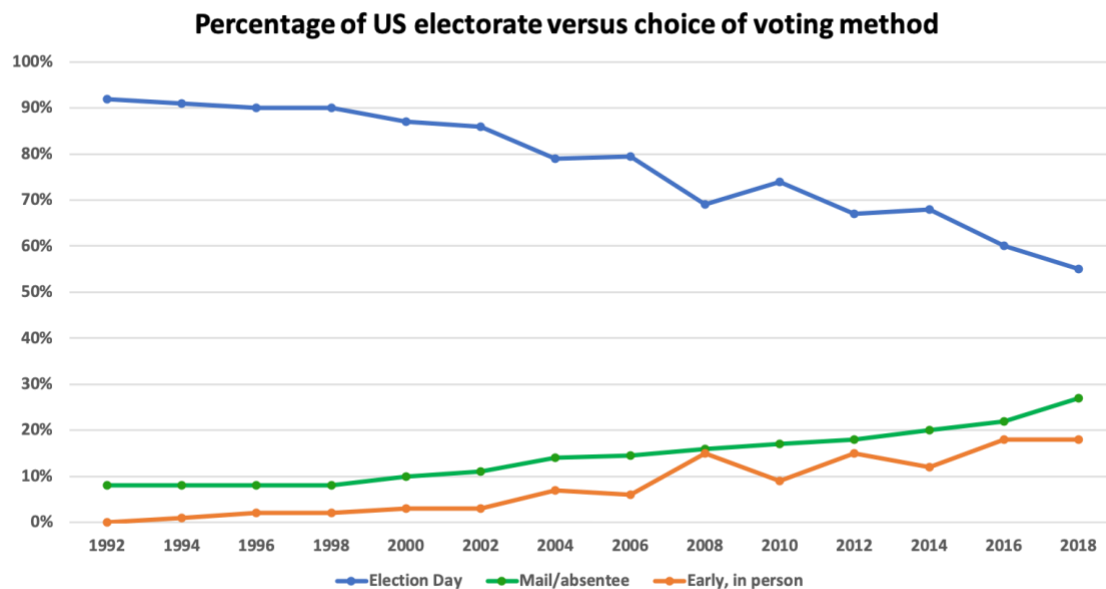
Additionally, below is a chart showing voter turnout in the 2018 primaries. You will note that states with a majority of their voters casting ballots they received by mail demonstrated a 15% point higher median turnout. Permanent absentee policies drive higher engagement in these “non-general” elections with even more impact in local and special elections.

At about 18%, Alaska’s turnout was well below the “polling place-centric” median of 22%, and about half the rate in the majority mailed-out ballot cohort of 37.5%.



Finally, the graphic below shows which voting methods voters are choosing nationally. Mail ballot voting is growing rapidly. With the passage of HB 115, Alaska can give its voters the opportunity to take advantage of this trend.

**Voting at Home (VAH) is growing steadily, and exceeds early in-person voting (EIPV)**  
**By 2022, fewer than 50% of all ballots will be cast in-person on Election Day**



Sources: 1992-2016:: MIT Election Lab. 2018: PEW Research

Putting in place a full permanent absentee option for voters aligns Alaska with the national trend towards a majority of ballots being cast other than in a traditional voting booth on Election Day.

Alaska would join its Western neighbors of Arizona, California, Hawaii, Montana, Oregon, Utah and Washington State in adopting this positive election reform.

Putting voters first, as HB 115 will do, is both the right thing, and the timely thing to do.