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Comments of the League re: Item 26-1409 on the June 10, 2026 Agenda of the Legislation & Intergovernmental Relations Committee

The League of Women Voters is a non-partisan grass-roots organization that from its beginning in 1920 has worked to protect and expand voting rights, including voting by mail. The League of Women Voters of Cook County ¹ fully supports the intentions behind the Resolution Calling for a Hearing Regarding a National Commitment to Defend, Protect, and Expand the Right to Vote, Item 26-1409, sponsored by Commissioner Kisha E. McCaskill, President Toni Preckwinkle, and many of the Cook County Board Members.

One aspect of voting that the League has been focusing on is voting by mail. Recent developments have made it more challenging to vote by mail. Currently pending before the United States Supreme Court is a case that could make voting by mail much more difficult if the Court holds that to be counted, a vote-by-mail ballot must be in the hands of the Election Authority on or before Election Day.

The League has been urging the Chicago Board of Elections (for Chicago voters) and the Cook County Clerk's office (for Suburban Cook voters) to make it easier for people to vote by mail by allowing voters to return their vote-by-mail ballots in their official, completed and sealed return envelopes to any polling place within each of the Authorities' respective jurisdictions on Election Day.

For many Chicago and Suburban Cook County voters, voting-by-mail is the preferred way to vote. It allows voters to choose when they will mark their ballots and allows them to easily research candidates while they are voting. Voters are thus more easily able to be informed and then vote, which is the goal of the League. Under existing Illinois law, such vote-by-mail ballots may be returned via the mail or by delivering to secure drop boxes provided by the applicable Election Authority.

Over 26% of the votes cast in Chicago for the March 17 Primary were via vote by mail, slightly more than half returned by mail and slightly less than half returned to secure drop boxes as reported by the Chicago Board of Elections.² In Suburban Cook County, not quite 19% of the ballots cast were via vote-by-mail ballots.³

Currently under Illinois law, vote-by-mail ballots received by mail up to 14 days after Election Day may be counted as long as the envelope is postmarked on or before Election Day. That previously made it fairly easy for voters to utilize the mail for returning their ballots.

However, returning vote-by-mail ballots via the mail has become more challenging. Prior to the March 17 Primary, both the Chicago Board of Elections and the Cook County Clerk's office did much to publicize the recent change by the United States Post Office as to when a piece of mail may be postmarked, which can now be several business days after a vote-by-mail envelope is mailed.

As a result, both Election Authorities urged voters to mail their ballots at least one week prior to Election Day or instead go to a window at the Post Office to have their return envelope postmarked to ensure the envelope would have a postmark date on or before Election Day. Alternatively, voters could instead utilize the drop boxes provided by each Election Authority -- if the voters could get to those locations.

For the March 17 Primary, the Chicago Board of Elections had 52 drop box locations for return of vote-by-mail ballots in their completed return envelopes that were able to be used during Early Voting and on Election Day: one "voting center" within each ward plus the "Supersite" in downtown Chicago and at 69 W. Washington, also downtown Chicago. However, these locations are not within walking distance for many voters.

For the March 17 Primary, the Cook County Clerk's office had 55 locations during Early Voting, but only 6 locations available on Election Day where there were drop boxes that were able to be used for return of vote-by-mail ballots: 69 W. Washington in downtown Chicago, the Melrose Park village hall, and the Courthouses of Bridgeview, Markham, Rolling Meadows, and Skokie. The vast majority of Suburban voters are not within walking distance of these locations.

The ability to utilize a drop box for returning a vote-by-mail ballot may become even more critical if the United States Supreme Court should rule that only vote-by-mail ballots received by Election Day may be counted. A law in Mississippi that allows vote-by-mail ballots received up to 5 business days after Election Day is currently being challenged at the Court. News reports have indicated that during oral arguments, it appeared that the Court was leaning toward striking down that grace period.⁴ Should that be the case, utilizing the mail would likely require the ballot to be returned even earlier before Election Day, and even then, the voter could not be assured that the ballot would be received on time.

Therefore, the League has urged the Chicago Board of Elections and the Cook County Clerk's office to allow all polling places on Election Day to be utilized for return of vote-by-mail ballots in their completed and sealed return envelopes. This would mean that all voters, or at least the vast majority of voters, would be within walking distance of the hundreds of polling places open on Election Day.

The League submits that both Election Authorities could allow this under existing Illinois law, which requires that a collection site must be secured by locks and may be opened only by election authority personnel. (10 ILCS sec.5/19-6.)

Each polling place in Chicago and Suburban Cook has an "Election Supply Carrier" (called the "Voting Supply Carrier" in Suburban Cook) that contains all the equipment and supplies necessary for voting at that polling place. The Carrier also contains an "auxiliary" ballot box portion of the Carrier that may be sealed/locked. That ballot box contains a slot for placing any paper ballots that are voted on in the event that the scanner is not available during any portion of the voting hours on Election Day.

That auxiliary ballot box could also be used for the vote-by-mail ballots in their return envelopes.

At the end of the day, the election judges could then break the seal on the auxiliary ballot box and remove any return envelopes containing vote-by-mail ballots. These could be placed in a designated envelope (that would be sealed and signed by all the election judges) and placed in the return bag, which bag is also used for returning any ballots not able to be scanned, as well as provisional ballots, among other key materials. That return bag is then sealed and returned to the appropriate Receiving Station by the election judges.

Yes, all of this would require additional procedures for the election judges at polling places and for the election authorities at the receiving stations to deal with the vote-by-mail ballots being returned. If the procedure outlined above by the League is not able to be used for some reason, we would urge the Election Authorities to find another solution. Otherwise, if nothing is done, the League is very concerned that failing to create these additional procedures would result in many voters not being able to be informed and vote.

League members have previously reported seeing voters trying to return their vote-by-mail ballots at polling places on Election Day, only to be told that they need to get to either a drop box location or an open post office where the postmark can be affixed at a window during voting hours. That has previously not been a viable option for many voters. Going to a post office on Election Day will not an option if the vote-by-mail ballot must be in the hands of the Election Authority on Election Day. And getting to a drop box location is not a real alternative for many voters. Utilizing the many polling places available on Election Day for the return of vote-by-mail ballots would provide that option.

The Chicago Board of Elections and the Cook County Clerk's office have both long been known to encourage voting by embracing new procedures that make it easier to vote. The League is urging both these Election Authorities to take the additional steps to continue to make utilizing vote-by-mail ballots a feasible option. We ask that the Cook County Commissioners support this effort.

June 8, 2026

¹ The Cook County League is made up of the over 1600 members of the 12 local Leagues in Cook County. It is part of the League of Women Voters of Illinois and the national League of Women Voters.

² As published on the Chicago Board of Elections web site:
<https://www.chicagoelections.gov/news/proclamation-official-results-march-17-2026-primary-election-city-chicago>

³ The Cook County Clerk's office reported that 394,256 ballots were cast in the March 17 Primary, https://www.cookcountyclerk.il.gov/sites/default/files/pdfs/march-2026-primary_certification_cook-county.pdf, and the Illinois State Board of Elections reported that Cook County stated that 73,677 ballots cast were vote-by-mail ballots.
<https://www.elections.il.gov/VotingAndRegistrationSystems/VoteByMailReport.aspx>.

⁴ *Watson v. Republican National Committee*. See, for example,
<https://www.scotusblog.com/2026/03/court-appears-ready-to-overturn-state-law-allowing-for-late-arriving-mail-in-ballots/>