



**Written Testimony Submitted to the Government Administrations and Election Committee on Joint House Resolutions 58 and 59, regarding a State Constitutional Amendment to Allow No-Excuse Absentee Voting and a Resolution Approving an Amendment to the State Constitution to Allow for Early Voting, respectively.**

Dear Government Administration and Election Committee Co-Chairs Sen. Flexer and Rep. Fox and Ranking Members Sen. Sampson and Rep. Mastrofrancesco and Members of the GAE Committee,

My name is Jamilah Prince-Stewart and I am the Executive Director of FaithActs for Education, a grassroots community organizing nonprofit based in Bridgeport and operating statewide.

We are people of faith building power to get our children the education they deserve. We believe that every child deserves the opportunity to graduate from college, take care of their family, and fulfill their God-given potential. We build relationships, we build leaders, and we build power through community organizing and civic engagement.

Founded six years ago, we are 80 churches, 500 members, 4,500 committed voters and 11,000 congregants strong. We know that our power comes not just from people but from people who vote.

Through our member churches, FaithActs secured 4,500 voter commitments this past year in the greater Bridgeport, Hartford, and New Haven areas. We know that those elected to government office and those who wish to be elected have many and varied gifts. But the one they all share is the ability to count.

This means true power, and real democracy, is achieved only through the polling place.

I was thinking recently of a woman named Annie Lee Cooper, the woman played by Oprah Winfrey in Ava DuVernay's 2014 film "Selma" who was prevented from registering to vote in Alabama. In real life, Annie Lee Cooper was beaten by infamous Dallas County Sheriff Jim Clark.

It was this incident that helped lead to the march from Selma to Montgomery and passage of the Voting Rights Act.

"Selma" helped burn those images into the American consciousness. But Black and Brown people have known for decades that access to the ballot has never been simple, and attempts to suppress Black and Brown votes continue today in parts of our country. Most importantly, it exists right here in the state of Connecticut.



It's for those reasons that FaithActs is proud to support these two proposed amendments to Connecticut's Constitution.

A fully functioning democracy must ensure that all voters can vote. By allowing for early voting and "no-excuse" absentee voting, these two resolutions put Connecticut on a path toward removing barriers:

Voting as a right. If I cannot make it to my polling place on Election Day, the exercise of that right to vote should not be subject to questioning by those in power, whose desire is to remain in power and who may feel threatened by my vote.

This isn't just talk for us. FaithActs, through its Faith Votes Campaign this past election season, activated more than 4,500 committed voters in greater-Bridgeport, greater-Hartford, and greater-New Haven areas.

Even during the pandemic, when most churches were physically closed and services were remote, we were able to activate 60 churches across the state to secure voter commitments, register voters and provide nonpartisan resources. We printed and distributed more than 8,300 bilingual, nonpartisan voter guides, which included photos of every candidate who would appear on a ballot, detailed candidate profiles, and sample ballots so that voters weren't surprised or confused on election day. For primary and general election days, we texted and called more than 3,000 committed voters and gave 100 voters a ride to the polls.

Unfortunately, as we did this work, we encountered first hand the real barriers put in front of voters. Specifically:

- Calls to registrar of voters or town clerk offices went unanswered
- People turned away from city hall when attempting to request or fill out an absentee ballot
- People never received their absentee ballots
- People were turned away at polling locations

While many of these acts of voter suppression were symptoms of operating in the middle of a pandemic, lack of training for staff, and poor data collection, they are all a call to action to make voting more accessible.

As we fought for all of our 4500 committed voters to exercise their right to vote, we were proud to be among other groundbreaking and game changing grassroots community organizing efforts to get out the vote across the country.



And now we are proud to support these two resolutions that we believe will help Connecticut fully realize the promise of the Voting Rights Acts of 1965.

Thank you.

Jamilah Prince-Stewart  
869 Orange Street, Unit 6W  
New Haven, CT 06511

FaithActs for Education  
160 Fairfield Avenue  
Bridgeport, CT 06604