

Rush is on to help Pennsylvania voters obtain IDs

More than 750,000 affected statewide

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By Timothy McNulty / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

A complicated and mostly unorganized effort to get photo identification for all Pennsylvania voters is under way statewide in a rush to comply with the new voter ID law before November's presidential election.

The election is 3 1/2 months away but given the hurdles to getting an approved ID -- including the fact that some of Pennsylvania's 67 counties either do not have driver's license centers or the centers are closed most days -- voting-rights advocates are trying to mobilize now.

The greatest efforts are in Philadelphia, where state records show 186,830 registered voters do not have PennDOT IDs, or 18 percent of all voters in the state's largest county.

Allegheny County has the second-highest number.

In Philadelphia, the Pennsylvania Voter ID Coalition, a collection of more than 80 civic groups, has set up a field office to track down those voters, using a list of names the Department of State provided Thursday.

"Time is clearly of the essence," said Zack Stalberg, president and CEO of Philadelphia's Committee of Seventy, a lead organizer of the coalition. "Trying to deal with this in September, October or November is going to be very difficult. We're trying to use July and August as effectively as possible."

The state released data July 3 showing that 758,939 registered voters statewide do not have PennDOT IDs. Allegheny County has 99,218.

Pittsburgh voter advocates -- who are still trying to get an outreach effort in place -- calculated Thursday that they must track down 1,168 voters without ID every business day through the election.

"There are a lot of people wanting to do a lot of things because so much needs to happen. We need help," said Celeste Taylor, a voter registration coordinator for the Pittsburgh NAACP.

Then there are the rural areas, with fewer voters but not as many organizers or state offices to help them.

"It's not just Philadelphia and Pittsburgh," said Marybeth Kuznik, executive director of VotePA and a judge of elections in Westmoreland County.

"In Butler, Mercer, Venango and Forest, people are going to be just as much at risk" of losing their vote.

Gov. Tom Corbett signed a bill in March requiring voters to present photo ID issued by the military, state or federal government at the polls, or from nursing homes and colleges in the state, as long as the IDs carry expiration dates. Republicans said the measure was needed to combat voter fraud, but Democrats argued there is little evidence of fraud and the effort was actually meant to dull their party's registration edge.

To obtain IDs, Pennsylvania voters need a Social Security card, a birth certificate (or other official naturalization document) and two proofs of residency, such as utility or tax records.

PennDOT will issue IDs for free and search for Pennsylvania birth certificates, but outside of urban areas, the process is not that easy. Nine counties do not have driver's license centers and others, such as Fayette, have centers that are open only one day a week.

Such factors infuriate critics of the new state law, one of the strictest in the nation.

Thirty states have voter ID requirements, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures, but Pennsylvania is one of five with requirements that photo ID is necessary to either vote or authorize a provisional ballot.

"Unfortunately, those most likely to have problems [with ID] are being the most severely suppressed -- the elderly, minorities, those with a disability," said Roberta Winters, the issues and action vice president for the Pennsylvania League of Women Voters, which is part of an ACLU suit seeking to block the rules. "Their voices are threatened to be silenced and they're already barely listened to."

Many voting-rights advocates and Democrats are banking on the lawsuit, which will be argued before Commonwealth Court starting July 25, to block the bill.

Others are concentrating on voter education and mobilization. The state has contracted with a Harrisburg-based public-relations firm, the Bravo Group, to help the Committee of Seventy and smaller civic groups around the state educate voters on the bill.

"Executing the law consists of different challenges," said the firm's president, Chris Bravacos. "There is no single way to approach it [statewide], even though the details are the same."

The state's rollout of the requirements has been repeatedly fumbled: The rules were not fully tested in the state's low-turnout April 24 primary; IDs for 74,000 state employees do not carry required expiration dates; the state initially gave non-driving voters mixed messages on the cost of IDs, which the law requires to be free; the state's election website has been marred with problems, such as listing the ID requirements for Hispanic voters in English; and the initial estimates on voters without ID were too low.

The Department of State long estimated there were only about 100,000 such voters.

In a review of voter ID last week, Franklin & Marshall's Terry Madonna, a longtime neutral observer of Pennsylvania politics, wrote that the bill "was not well thought out, planned, or executed. ... It's truly a repulsive act."

The Bravo Group's \$249,675 contract also has been questioned, since Mr. Bravacos is a fundraiser for Mitt Romney and the former executive director of the state Republican Party.

"Are these people crazy?" said Faye Anderson, a voting-rights activist for the Cost of Freedom Project in Philadelphia who first publicized the contract. "This person is going to draft the outreach plan to empower the very people the Republicans just disenfranchised?"

"The idea that you would give a Mitt Romney fundraiser the contract on selling or pushing that message is literally absurd," said state Rep. Eugene DePasquale, D-York, his party's auditor general candidate.

Mr. Bravacos, who started his firm in 1999 after working for Gov. Tom Ridge, said, "We have a 13-year track record being professional. I have personal political views, as does everybody, but our work has been nothing but excellent. We're partisan for the goals of our clients."

The state soon will award a roughly \$4.75 million contract for advertising the voter ID changes, according to the Department of State, and may issue letters to the 758,939 voters without ID notifying them of the new rules.

The challenges do not just face Democrats: Five of the top 10 counties that have the greatest number of voters without IDs have GOP registration edges, including Delaware, Chester, Lancaster, York and Cumberland.

"I am confident that all Pennsylvanians who are seeking voter identification will have plenty of opportunities to get one," said Mike Barley, executive director of the state Republican Party. "I have more faith than my Democratic counterparts that voters can secure identification before election day. This is a simple commonsense law that polls continue to show that the majority of Pennsylvanians agree with. Protecting the sanctity of the vote should be a bipartisan endeavor."

Mr. Corbett said he had no plans to suspend the ID requirements, as some critics have suggested.

"I don't know what the courts are going to do. But we have four months to get registered. ... [There is] plenty of time to go get it," he said.

A Pittsburgh voter ID forum hosted by the League of Women Voters of Greater Pittsburgh and other groups is scheduled for 7 p.m. July 23 at the JCC Levinson Hall, 4738 Forbes Ave., Squirrel Hill. Karen Langley contributed. Tim McNulty: tmcnulty@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1581. Follow the Early Returns blog at earlyreturns.sites.post-gazette.com or on Twitter at [@EarlyReturns](https://twitter.com/EarlyReturns).
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