



**Office of
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For Immediate Release

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House and Senate reach agreement on expanded voting options for 2020 state and municipal elections

BOSTON – The House of Representatives and the Senate have reached agreement on legislation that will provide Massachusetts voters with expanded early, absentee, and mail-in voting options for state and municipal elections taking place in 2020.

State Representative Hannah Kane (R-Shrewsbury) said House Bill 4820, *An Act relative to voting options in response to COVID-19*, will give Massachusetts residents more choices on how to cast their ballots so they can safely participate in upcoming elections. The bill represents a compromise reached by a six-member Conference Committee, which worked to reconcile the differences between previous versions of the bill passed by the House and Senate.

The Conference Committee report was accepted by the House on a vote of 157-1 on June 30. The bill is expected to reach Governor Baker’s desk on July 2, following a Senate vote to accept the report and additional votes needed to enact the bill in both branches.

House Bill 4820 requires the Secretary of State to mail applications to all registered voters by July 15 so they can request a mail-in ballot for the September 1 primary election, using a pre-paid return envelope, with a second mailing sent out by September 14 for voters to request a mail-in ballot for the November 3 general election. Applications and ballots must be made available in any language required by the bilingual election requirements of the federal Voting Rights Act.

“I am proud to have joined with my colleagues today to support legislation to make the upcoming elections accessible for all voters in the Commonwealth. It is critical we minimize the impact the pandemic has on our democracy by ensuring residents do not avoid voting due to the fear of getting sick. I thank House and Senate conferees for working hard to reach a compromise on this legislation,” remarked Representative Kane.

House Bill 4820 also requires the Secretary of State to develop an online portal for voters to request a mailed ballot. The portal must be operational by October 1 for the general election, but the bill directs the Secretary to develop the portal earlier, if feasible, to accommodate ballot requests for the primary.

To avoid overcrowding at polling locations on election day, completed early voting ballots can be mailed, delivered in-person to the local clerk’s office, or placed in a secured municipal drop-box, if one

is available. Cities and towns will be required to provide early voting hours, including weekend hours, for individuals casting ballots in-person for the primary election from August 22-28, and from October 17-October 30 for the general election.

Representative Kane said House Bill 4820 gives municipal clerks the ability to process ballots received by mail before election day, as long as those ballots are kept secured, locked and unexamined, and no results are announced until after the polls close. Cities and towns can also eliminate the check-out table at polling locations to further reduce the number of poll workers needed.

House Bill 4820 allows cities and towns to change a polling location for reasons of public health or public convenience, provided the vote to change the location takes place at least 20 days prior to the election. The bill also requires communities seeking to change a polling location to post a report on their website at least three days prior to the vote detailing whether the change in location will have a disparate impact on access to the polls based on race, national origin, disability, income or age.

The bill also requires the Secretary of State to:

- provide regulations by July 15 for electronic poll books to be used for the 2020 state elections and all future elections;
- conduct a public awareness campaign on the expanded voting options available to voters;
- promulgate emergency regulations to ensure the use of public health safeguards at early voting sites and polling places, including personal protective equipment and social distancing guidelines between poll workers and voters;
- report back to the Legislature on how voting can be made more accessible for voters with disabilities; and
- report on the costs of implementing the changes included in the bill.

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