August 25, 2020

Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor of New York
Executive Chamber
State Capitol
Albany, New York 12224

Re: Voting safely in New York’s general election

Dear Governor Cuomo:

On behalf of our 2.5 million members and all older New Yorkers, we thank you for recently signing legislation aimed at ensuring that voters can make their voices heard in the general election without risking their health - specifically for ensuring that voters can vote via absentee ballot if they are concerned about contracting or spreading the coronavirus. We also thank you for signing legislation to address issues around absentee ballot postmarks that arose in the June primary. And we thank you for your recent Executive Order to assess staffing needs, make sure voters are informed of their voting options, and ensure timely counting of absentee ballots.

With voters set to go to the polls in just ten short weeks on November 3, we believe that New York should take aggressive action now to ensure that all registered voters can cast their ballots safely and securely, whether they choose to do so in person or by mail. For nearly 40 years, the turnout of voters over the age of 45 has significantly outpaced that of younger Americans. For example, according to U.S. Census Bureau data for the 2016 presidential election, 71 percent of Americans over the age of 65 voted. That’s compared with just 46 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds. Moreover, people over the age of 65 show up to the polls far more than any other age group.

However, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that people over 65 years of age, and those with serious health conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, and lung disease seem to be at highest risk for severe disease and even death from COVID-19 related illness.

In order to protect voters, election officials, and volunteers who staff polling locations – many of whom are retirees – New York should begin efforts now to bolster alternative means for voters to cast their ballots through the mail, and to ensure that those who do cast their ballots in person can...
do so as safely as possible. Older New Yorkers should not have to risk their lives or their health to exercise their right to vote.

AARP New York is recommending that New York State take whatever additional steps are necessary to **send absentee ballot applications to all registered voters in the state**, along with a clear explanation of how to exercise their right to vote with all the absentee and in-person options available to them. This would be especially useful for those who are in long-term care centers, medical facilities, or quarantined due to the virus. Moreover, to ensure that every vote counts, the state should make certain that it schedules its delivery of absentee applications and ballots so that voters will have ample time to return completed ballots in time for them to be counted.

In addition, we believe that the state should:

- Provide accommodations for voters with disabilities who need assistance casting their absentee ballot, as well as ensuring that all residents of skilled nursing facilities have the opportunity to exercise their right to vote with whatever assistance they might require to do so under the circumstances;

- Provide pre-addressed, postage paid envelopes for all absentee ballot applications and ballots, along with sending all voters an absentee ballot application as recommended above;

- Ensure that there is adequate trained staff, as well as adequate sorting and counting equipment, to handle the increased volume of absentee ballots that will be expected;

- Ensure that election officials are provided clear chain of custody guidelines for handling ballots throughout the entire process;

- If necessary, extend deadlines for local election officials to submit final ballot counts to accommodate the increased volume of absentee ballots.

AARP New York believes that given the serious nature and risks posed by COVID-19, New York should strongly encourage as many voters as possible to vote through the mail. However, we also recognize that there remains a need to provide for adequate in-person voting for those who choose not to vote by mail or who require some assistance to cast their ballot. Therefore, we also urge New York to:

- Expand early voting periods, including adding Saturday and Sunday voting;

- Recruit poll workers early, including among state and local government employees, as well as local university and high school students;

- Maintain as many polling places as possible, with the goal of having as many as would normally be open, if not more, to avoid long lines and crowded polling locations;
- Provide notice to voters as far in advance of election day as possible if polling locations are consolidated, preferably at least 30 days before the election;

- Provide for appointments for early voting and curbside voting, if possible; and do everything possible to follow best practices to ensure that polling locations are sanitary, including providing appropriate personal protective equipment for all poll workers and taking all other necessary measures to ensure in-person voting can be accomplished as safely as possible for all concerned.

The right to vote is among the most basic of all political rights. Therefore, to ensure that voters understand the changes that New York State will be making to election processes this year, AARP believes that it is vital that the state engage in a voter education campaign on the measures that are being taken for the 2020 election. We also believe that New York must ensure that election officials have all the resources necessary to conduct this election.

These are challenging times for all of New York’s residents. As New Yorkers look toward our elected officials for leadership, we at AARP thank you for your actions to-date aimed at empowering voters, and look forward to working with you to ensure that the largest voting bloc in our population, 50+ voters, can continue to have a safe and secure way to exercise their right to vote during this unprecedented time.

Sincerely,

Beth Finkel
State Director
AARP New York

CC Secretary to the Governor, Melissa DeRosa
NYS Senate Elections Committee Chair Zellnor Myrie
NYS Assembly Elections Law Committee Chair Charles Lavine