



# NORTH CAROLINA

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## STATE BOARD OF ELECTIONS

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### **Remarks from Executive Director Karen Brinson Bell**

State Board of Elections Meeting

March 20, 2020

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Board Members, for providing time at the start of the meeting for me to address the matter that has changed life as we know it for the past week or more – coronavirus or more specifically, COVID-19.

While you may be familiar with many of the actions we have taken to address how this pandemic will affect elections and daily operations, I would like to more fully outline those steps to ensure that you and the public are aware.

Our response to COVID-19 is a tiered approach: immediate, short-term, and long-term.

As an immediate response, we issued a public statement last Thursday to identify some of the other timely steps we are taking including:

- An emergency amendment to the administrative rule that allows me as Executive Director to take emergency action in times of disease epidemics as I would in times of other natural disaster. This rule amendment took effect today and I will speak later in my remarks about the executive order that is being issued in conjunction with this meeting.
- On Sunday, county boards of elections were issued Numbered Memo 2020-11, which addressed operations at the State Board of Elections office and how counties may alter their operations. On Thursday of last week, State Board staff began teleworking based upon guidance from the Governor and the State Human Resources Office. Nearly all State Board staff is now teleworking with fewer than 10 staff members and myself continuing to work on site so that we may answer the main phone lines, process mail, and facilitate teleworking. Counties are taking necessary steps to limit public interaction, which has included the closure of some offices. The status of county offices has been posted to our website and on social media.
- In addition to being briefed by numerous state and federal partners, I am part of a joint elections infrastructure working group led by the U.S. Elections Assistance Commission and CISA, the cybersecurity and infrastructure division of the Department of Homeland Security.
- We formed a North Carolina Task Force on Elections & COVID-19 Response, which consists of staff from the State Board and nine county boards of elections directors or staff members. Additionally, a representative from North Carolina Emergency Management is

participating. The Task Force met on Wednesday to discuss concerns and possible solutions to address absentee-by-mail and in-person voting during a disease outbreak.

- General Counsel Katelyn Love and I met with Secretary of Public Safety Erik Hooks, State Emergency Management Director Mike Sprayberry, and others from our State Emergency Response Team to learn more about the expected window of the disease outbreak, availability of supplies, and support that can be provided by our state partners.
- Last but not least, our immediate response includes expanding our voter confidence campaign with additional materials and social media posts about the coronavirus. We have also created a dedicated webpage – [ncsbe.gov/coronavirus](https://ncsbe.gov/coronavirus) – for the latest information on county boards of elections operations and other key information about elections and the coronavirus. It is now as critical to communicate with the public about how this pandemic affects elections as it is to inform them about election security. No matter the reason, we want North Carolinians to know #YourVoteCountsNC.

I would like to address our short-term response at the end of my remarks since the executive order directly addresses our short-term concerns.

Looking long-term, we recognize that the long-term window is really just a little more than 3 months beyond today. If we walk backwards from the November election, then we realize we begin one-stop early voting in October and absentee-by-mail voting in September. To meet these deadlines, the state and county board offices must ramp up their preparations during the months of July and August when we must order supplies, redesign and print any envelopes, forms, or documents, proof and print ballots, make updates to our SEIMS system, prepare training materials, and make any accommodations necessary for coronavirus.

Due to these time constraints and guidance we have received, our response to coronavirus for the November General Election must not upend the system we have in place but rather be an all out effort to reinforce, strengthen, and improve voting as we know it in North Carolina. This means reminding voters that North Carolina is and has been a no-excuse vote by mail state and shoring up our counties so they can meet increased demand for this method of voting. We must work with our State Emergency Management and Health and Human Services officials to ensure we follow the safest public health and sanitation practices possible. We must think outside the box and look at ways to recruit more poll workers and enable them to serve voters better while looking out for their wellbeing, too. And we will work with our legislators, who have already reached out to us about addressing these needs, to determine legislative actions that will help administer elections during disease outbreak or other conditions that may impede voting. In particular, the Speaker of the House has established the House Select Committee on COVID-19, which will address elections as part of the Continuity of State Operations. The most trying of times are often when some of the most innovative solutions come about and with our partners and dedicated election professionals working at the state and county level – we will not let North Carolina down. We will ensure that all North Carolinians are able to exercise their right to vote without fear of exposure to disease when they cast their ballot.

This leads me to the executive order and how we can respond in the short-term to matters still at hand with the recent primary and also the forthcoming 11th Congressional District Republican Second Primary. I have said on numerous occasions, that we do not stop elections, rather we determine how to proceed with elections. We have realized that the best way to proceed with the 11th Congressional District Republican Second Primary is to move the election date to June 23, 2020, and I have signed an executive order to this effect in conjunction with this meeting. The additional six weeks from the originally prescribed date of May 12 will ensure we are beyond the eight-week timeframe recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to limit gatherings of 50 or more people. I consulted with the State Republican Party Chairman, Michael Whatley, and 11th Congressional District Republican Chairman, Aubrey Woodard, and they support this decision. State Board staff and I have also been in consult with other state officials to ensure that this postponement to June 23 is a response that will ensure the safety of the voters, poll workers, and election staff while carrying out the election process to allow the voters who can participate in the second primary to determine the Republican nominee for the November election.

Additionally, by this executive order, all election protest proceedings pending from the March 3, 2020 primary are stayed until May 20, 2020 unless a county board of elections can conduct the protest hearing without endangering the health and safety of those present.

Furthermore, the deadline to complete and report the sorting of ballots by precinct is extended to May 20, 2020, though this does not prohibit this process from being conducted sooner if health and safety can be assured.

Finally, for those county boards of elections that have closed or may be preparing to close their offices to the public due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they have been instructed to continue to accept voter registration forms, absentee request forms, and other documents. If forms cannot be brought inside the office, then secure, immovable containers must be available for the public to deposit forms. The requirement that an absentee request form drop off log be kept is suspended by the executive order for county boards that have closed their office due to the pandemic.

Thank you for your support during these challenging times. Your concern for the health and wellbeing of our State Board staff, county election officials, and undoubtedly the voters has been tremendous and I know you will continue to have them at the forefront of your decision making just as I have strived to do.