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Safe Elections Network Launches Student Poll Worker Recruitment and Training Program

Common Cause, MassVOTE, Harvard Ash Center and partners helping fill empty positions at the polls

BOSTON – Voting rights advocates, educators and local elections officials have developed a statewide program to recruit, train, and deploy students to serve at the polls.

Reporters are welcome to take the training, also, by emailing kmensik@commoncause.org.

The Massachusetts Student Poll Worker Corps will help fill poll worker positions that are vacant because of COVID-19.

“The challenge facing elections officials during this pandemic is threefold,” said **Assistant Director of Common Cause Massachusetts, Kristina Mensik**. “Many regular poll workers cannot work, because they are in an age demographic that makes them especially vulnerable to COVID-19. Also, it’s hard for officials to hold in-person trainings for new staff. But on top of that, many officials are already ‘under water’ implementing all the changes necessary to conduct elections during a pandemic. We understand very clearly that the need is not just for hands, but rather for people who already have a basic level of training.”

The program provides a top-level overview of working at the polls and the most important details of serving as an elections inspector. It also quizzes participants on some of the most important qualities needed in a poll worker.

“We’ve heard from election officials that folks flooding their inbox with offers to help is great, but what would be more helpful is a system where they know that the substitute poll workers are a good fit for the job, and that they’ll show up,” Mensik said. “We designed this training program with that in mind.”

The Massachusetts Student Poll Worker Corps is based on research and best practices. Its developers interviewed municipal clerks and elections officials about their particular needs and their concerns and recommendations. The program incorporates best-practices from

researchers, educators, and organizations with experience implementing student GOTV and registration efforts.

“Across the board, the most successful student registration and GOTV programs are those with targeted support: a program administrator helping students fill out their registration, sending lots of reminders, and serving as a resource for any questions,” **says Samantha Perlman, Civic Engagement Manager at the Scholars Strategy Network.** “Especially when a process is new – whether voting or working at the polls – that personal touchpoint is extremely important. As with many democracy programs, the relationship-building or facilitator components of youth GOTV programs make them successful. That’s why I’m especially excited about this program: we talk to every student who goes through the training, have multiple touchpoints, and they are connected to elections officials by those on our team who are already in regular communication and have established relationships with elections officials.”

The Massachusetts Student Poll Worker Corps either sends participants immediately to election officials, or places them in the “Reserve Corps.” The program is not limited to students; anyone can participate.

“From speaking with election officials in cities like Boston, Worcester, and Lowell, we already know that these cities alone are in need of dozens, if not hundreds, of poll workers,” **said Tegan George, Deputy Director at MassVOTE.** “On top of this, recent elections in Massachusetts and across the country have revealed that poll workers cancel with short notice, sometimes just days before an election. Young people, particularly students, will prove critical to filling this gap. Furthermore, by including a Reserve Corps in this program, we can look at each individual town and city and figure out who needs poll workers in the days leading up to the election. We want a cohort of trained students who are ready to go as those last-minute shortages arise.”

The program is also recruiting students to help process early and mail ballots, and recruiting students to serve as translators.

“We need to make sure that everyone can vote as safely and easily as possible during this pandemic,” said **Senator Barry Finegold, co-Chair of the Legislature’s Joint Committee on Election Laws.** “That’s why the Legislature passed a bill to expand early voting, implement a secure vote-by-mail system, and strengthen safety measures for in-person voting in our upcoming elections. The bill also gives local election officials additional flexibility when selecting poll workers. I strongly support the Safe Elections Network’s effort to send out student poll workers to polling places that need help. This initiative will help to strengthen civic engagement and make our elections run more smoothly.”