

resolution to the legal issues surrounding holding an election during a dangerous pandemic so that it may conduct a safe and fair election during both the July primary run-off and the November general election. To advise the Court, Harris County submits a declaration from Michael Winn, the Harris County Administrator of Elections as Exhibit A (“Winn Decl.”).

Harris County, Texas, is the largest county in the state with 14% of the state’s registered voters, 4.7 million people, and almost 2.4 million registered voters. Winn Decl. at ¶ 10. With a population larger than 27 states, it is home to the most diverse population and electorate in Texas. More than 145 languages are spoken in Harris County. *See* Lomi Kriel, *Just how diverse is Houston, 145 languages spoken here*, HOUS. CHRON., Nov. 5, 2015, *available at* <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/article/Houstonians-speak-at-least-145-languages-at-home-6613182.php>. The size and scope of the County make the smooth operations of elections challenging in the most ideal of circumstances. Winn Decl. at ¶¶ 8, 23, 26. The ongoing threat of COVID-19 presents unique challenges that affect voting access throughout the country, but present particular challenges for the people of Texas and Harris County given their size and diversity. In addition to representing the interests of its voter registrar, County Clerk, and elections administration department, Harris County represents the People of Harris County in ensuring that their constitutional rights to ballot access and fundamental fairness in the electoral process is preserved. This includes not having their government make endangering one’s health a condition to exercising the right to vote.

The United States Supreme Court has long held that the right to vote is “a fundamental political right, because [it is] preservative of all rights.” *Yick Wo v. Hopkins*, 118 U.S. 356, 370 (1886). As such, this right must be safeguarded from actions that would threaten to chill citizens’ participation in the franchise. *Thomas v. Groebl*, 147 Tex. 70, 78 (1948). The importance of the

right to vote hinges on access to the ballot. The profound and continuing threats of the COVID-19 pandemic place the question of access at issue today. Plaintiffs seek enforcement of the definition of “disability” under the Texas Elections Code as allowing anyone for whom voting in person presents a likelihood of injury to the voter’s health in order to provide a consistent statewide standard for voting by mail. *See* TEX. ELEC. CODE § 82.002(a).

Harris County writes to support the Plaintiffs’ position and to highlight three additional implications raised by this case, as well as provide the broader context of considerations for holding a safe and fair election. First, the ongoing fear of contracting COVID-19 — not only on voters but also on election workers — has a profound and practical impact on the ability to hold in-person early and Election Day voting. Harris County requires more than 6,000 workers to conduct early and Election Day voting. Winn Decl. at ¶ 21. Persistent concerns about COVID-19 dramatically limit the number of people willing to serve as poll workers. Second, without clarification on what constitutes a “disability,” far fewer voters will exercise the vote by mail (“VBM”) option, fearing the possibility of prosecution for violating the law given that the State of Texas has shown a willingness to aggressively pursue claims of alleged voter fraud. Finally, the lack of clarification regarding what is a “disability,” and the subsequent lack of participation in VBM will have a disparate impact on minority and younger voters given the demographics of Harris County and that all voters over 65 will have unquestioned access to VBM.

In addition, Harris County seeks to support its elections administration to work toward viable solutions for the County and the State to hold a safe and fair election during the COVID-19 pandemic. Much like “flattening the curve” of the pandemic, a safe and fair election will require flattening the curve of voters congregating in locations where they physically cannot socially distance. This can be accomplished in large part by expanding VBM from its current ratio of 8 to

12% of voters to a much higher percentage so that the in-person voters whether during early voting or election day are decreased to a safely manageable number. Winn Decl. at ¶¶ 1, 20.

I. The Secretary of State’s un-useful advisory on the COVID-19 pandemic creates an urgent need for legal clarity.

Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo declared an emergency over the COVID-19 virus on March 11, 2020. Governor Abbott declared an emergency for the State of Texas on March 13, 2020. *See* TEX. GOV’T CODE §§ 401.062, 418.011 *et seq.* Also on March 13, President Trump declared a national emergency. Under these and subsequent orders, and through consultation with health professionals, the governments have advised the People to use a specific set of practices to reduce the risk of infection. Among those are requirements to keep a distance from other people (social distancing), numerical limitations for any and all gatherings, and taking sanitary measures such as regular hand washing. These practices have been widely adopted and are currently in use; nevertheless, the spread of the virus grows albeit not at as rapid a pace as it would have otherwise. Because of the unpredictability of the COVID-19 virus, it is unclear how long these restrictions will be in place, and even if the pandemic subsides, when it may re-occur. According to medical studies verified by the World Health Organization (“WHO”) and the Center for Disease Control (“CDC”), the premature relaxing of these restrictions increases the risk of a COVID-19 recurrence. *See* Tim Colburn, *Covid19: extending or relaxing distance control measures*, THE LANCET, Mar. 25, 2020, available at [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667\(20\)30072-4/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(20)30072-4/fulltext).

While models and predictions can be made, it is impossible to know for certain when normal social interaction will be safe, and even if it becomes safe, when the pandemic could re-occur with little warning. Conducting elections does not lend itself to short-noticed changes in election procedures given the planning and mustering of resources necessary to conduct an

election. Winn Decl. at ¶¶ 8, 11, 12, 22, 29, 33. Nonetheless, sixteen states have postponed their primary elections and many are exploring the expansion of VBM as an option in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Five states, Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Utah, and Washington, previously implemented voting by mail for all elections, and others like Arizona and California allow all voters to add themselves to a permanent list of mail voters. *See* Epstein and Saul, *Does Vote-by-Mail Favor Democrats? No. It's a False Argument by Trump*, NEW YORK TIMES, April 10, 2020 at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/10/us/politics/vote-by-mail.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share>.

Upcoming July run-off deadlines and the complexity of planning the November election leave no room for “wait and see” what the pandemic or the State of Texas will do. Waiting to give elections administrators clarity will cause another Wisconsin where last minute changes and legal wrangling left voters and election workers exposed to COVID-19 health risks and other voters turned away or discouraged into not voting. *See* Winn Decl. at ¶¶ 29, 33.

Texas and Harris County are currently scheduled to have primary runoff elections on July 14, 2020, with early voting beginning July 6th. *See* Texas Secretary of State, *Current Election Information*, available at <https://www.sos.state.tx.us/elections/laws/current-elections-information.shtml>. The last day to apply for a vote by mail ballot is July 2, 2020. *Id.* Holding an election in Harris County is a challenge for every election requiring months of preparation. Winn Decl. at ¶ 11. Counties require adequate preparation and time to accommodate the real concerns COVID-19 presents in the voting process. *See generally* Winn Decl. Harris County needs clear legal answers as soon as humanly possible to enable its elections department to prepare for the July 14 run-off. Winn Decl. at ¶¶ 9, 33. Further, Harris County needs as much preparation as possible for the November presidential year general election to accommodate COVID-19’s effects on public health and safety particularly considering the added voting times anticipated with the

repeal of straight-ticket voting. Winn Decl. at ¶¶ 23, 33.

A. The Texas Secretary of State’s Advisory failed to grant legal clarity through its power of interpretation and only injected legal ambiguity.

The Secretary of State is charged with interpreting the Election Code and maintaining uniformity of election administration across the state. TEX. GOV’T CODE §§ 31003 (“The secretary of state shall obtain and maintain uniformity in the application, operation, and interpretation of this code and of the election laws outside this code.”), 31.004 (the secretary of state shall provide assistance and advice, including statutory interpretation to elections administrators). On April 2, 2020, the Texas Secretary of State issued Advisory 2020-14-COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Voting and Election Procedures. Ex. A (“SOS COVID-19 Advisory”). This Advisory covers various election procedures in light of the pandemic including the availability of ballots by mail for persons with disabilities:

One of the grounds for voting by mail is disability. The Election Code defines “disability” to include “a sickness or physical condition that prevents the voter from appearing at the polling place on election day without a likelihood of need personal assistance or injuring the voter’s health.” (Sec. 82.002.) Voters who meet this definition and wish to vote a ballot by mail must submit an application for ballot by mail.

SOS COVID-19 Advisory at 2.

Although elections administrators had raised the question, the SOS COVID-19 Advisory does not go on to answer the legal question presented here: whether a healthy person who fears infection if he or she were to appear in person to vote fits this description, although it would have been very easy to say so. Thus, this Court can presume the State of Texas is refusing to provide clarity without court intervention.

II. Voting by mail is a legal option under the plain language of the statute and offers no partisan advantage.

A. Voting by mail is an option under the plain language of existing law.

Texas law allows certain voters to request an application to vote by mail. TEX. ELEC. CODE § 84.001. To cast an early voting ballot by mail, a voter must submit an application. *Id.* at § 84.001(a). To be eligible to receive a ballot by mail, a voter must be: (1) absent from the county of residence during early voting and election day, (2) disabled or ill, (3) age 65 or over, or (4) confined to jail but not yet finally convicted of a felony. TEX. ELEC. CODE §§ 84.001-.004. At issue in this case is the definition of a person who is eligible due to a “disability” which the statute broadly defines as a “disabled” voter who has a:

. . . sickness or physical condition that prevents the voter from appearing at the polling place on election day without a *likelihood* of needing personal assistance or of *injuring the voter’s health*.

TEX. ELEC. CODE § 82.002 (emphasis added). Plaintiffs argue, and Harris County strongly concurs, that COVID-19 places all voters in the position of contracting a disease that may be fatal or cause severe suffering with long-term health consequences — that is, “injuring the voter’s health” — should they be forced to vote in person. This statutory definition does not require a current medical condition but rather includes those whose health may be injured by appearing in person to vote. Consequently, all voters should be free to vote by mail in the July 14 run-off and the November election. The Secretary of State’s failure to make a definitive ruling lends legal ambiguity to the matter exposing voters to potential prosecutions and opening the election results up to election contest challenges.

In 2015, the Texas Attorney General opined on whether the term “disability” under Section 82.002 refers only to “sickness or physical condition” or if the definition of disability includes the concept of “disability” as used by the Social Security Administration and the United States

Department of Veteran Affairs. The Attorney General asked the Secretary of State for its opinion and in a brief submitted by its Director of Elections the Secretary of State replied that “the appropriate standard for mail-in voting based on a disability is contained in the words of 82.002.”

The Opinion concluded that

In accordance with the plain language of section 82.002, to be eligible for early voting by mail, a qualified voter need only satisfy the disability standard under section 82.002. Consistent with the SOS’s construction of the statute, a determination of disability under a different standard or definition of “disability,” standing alone, is not determinative of a person’s qualification for early mail-in voting under Section 82.002.

See Tex. Att’y Gen Op. No. KP-0009 (2015) at 2. Thus, the plain language of the statute controls what constitutes a “disability” for the purposes of eligibility for early voting by mail.

The AG Opinion goes on to note that “while proof of disability may not be necessary to apply for a mail-in ballot, its production may be compelled if a voter’s qualifications for voting by mail is challenged in court.” *Id.* at 1-2, n.2. Moreover, if a voter’s qualification as “disabled” is successfully challenged, that voter’s vote is void. *Id.* (citing *Tiller v. Martinez*, 974 S.W.2d 769, 775 (Tex. App. – San Antonio 1998, pet. dismissed w.o.j.)). This observation raises another problem with the ambiguity created by the SOS COVID-19 Advisory: widespread election contests. Unless this Court immediately grants legal clarity the Secretary of State has, in effect, infected the election with a poison pill. Without legal clarity any election results will be subject to an election contest and voters who tried to preserve their health and life by voting by mail will be subject to subpoena, having their vote voided, and possible prosecution.

B. VBM lends no partisan advantage.

While the lead Plaintiff in this action is a political party, the Court should recognize that there is no actual partisan advantage to greater participation in vote by mail programs. While the conventional wisdom and latest social media commentary believe VBM favors Democratic

candidates, this is simply not true. Texas and Harris County have a long history of bipartisan participation in VBM programs. Because partisan campaigns distribute VBM applications, the elections department can easily ascertain the likely partisan inclination of the voters and has tracked the source of these ballot requests. Winn Decl. at 13. Also, the number of mail ballots that cast straight-party tickets in Harris County were disproportionately Republican even in the last general election when Democrats won countywide. In 2018, when 55% of the straight-ticket ballots overall voted Democratic and only 44% voted Republican, 51% of the VBM straight-ticket ballots were Republicans to 49% for the Democrats. Winn Decl. at ¶ 13; *See Harris County 2018 results.*

Analyses have been done on the effect of VBM and found no notable evidence of any partisan advantage. In a detailed review of mail ballot participation in two states, Colorado and Utah, a leans Democratic and a heavily Republican state respectively, the evidence shows no partisan advantage. *See* Amelia Showalter, *Colorado 2014: Comparisons of Predicted and Actual Turnout*, Aug. 8, 2017, available at <https://www.voteathome.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Colorado-2014-voter-turnout-study.pdf>; Amelia Showalter, *Utah 2016: Evidence for the positive turnout effects of “Vote at Home” (also known as Vote By Mail) in particular counties*, May 3, 2018, available at https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/ef45f5_fcc651c4d4f1456b8-340bb4c2cc0ca12.pdf. In those studies of all-mail elections in Colorado and Utah there was only a minor partisan advantage in each state. *Id.* The Colorado study found that Republicans outperformed their predicted turnout in 2014 by a slightly higher margin than did Democrats, with Republicans winning four of the five statewide races on the ballot. *See Colorado Election Results*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 17, 2014, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/elections/2014/colorado-elections>. Two years later, in Utah, Democrats gained an equally slight advantage in counties that

had switched to all-mail voting. Showalter, *Utah 2016*.

Notably, both states saw overall turnout increases — especially among those voters considered least likely to participate in the elections — but neither indicated any clear partisan advantage. See Epstein and Saul, *Does Vote-by-Mail Favor Democrats? No. It's a False Argument by Trump*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 10, 2020, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/10/us/politics/vote-by-mail.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share>.

Thus, VBM created a greater opportunity to vote, without any partisan advantage.

III. Voters, Harris County, and its Election Administrator Need Immediate Clarity.

Voters need to know there will be safe ways to vote in the July and November elections. Election administrators need to know clear rules for conducting elections during the pandemic as soon as possible so they may plan accordingly. This ambiguity created by the SOS COVID-19 Advisory threatens to result in a patchwork of decisions by each county's elections officer, potentially risking the lives of tens of thousands of Texans, and threatening the integrity of the electoral process. This Court must give local officials clarity to conduct the election.

A. Fear of contracting COVID-19 has dramatic impact on holding early and Election Day voting because of a shortage of workers.

While the potential dangers to voters forced to line up and participate in person at election sites is clear, the potential risks to poll workers are equally significant but may not be as apparent. Thus, understanding the gravity of the effects on workers bears some explanation. Threats to the health of election workers will likely result in a steep decline in participation, in turn resulting in an inadequate number of polling locations due to staffing shortages, which will in turn have a disastrous effect on the conduct of the election. Under the current election process, election judges and workers are required to install, activate, and operate voting booths and equipment and dismantle them at the end of the day after mass voter usage. Winn Decl. at ¶ 30. Election workers

must handle identification cards handed to them by voters and pass paperwork back and forth with voters. *Id.* These workers will be subject to direct contact with potentially thousands of individuals, many of whom may be infected or carrying COVID-19. The result of the exposure could see the possibility of many workers contracting COVID-19 and workers unaware they have the virus infecting voters in turn inflaming the pandemic. Indeed, this scenario has already played out in Florida, where the state went ahead with its March 17 primary only to see election workers test positive for COVID-19 after the election not knowing how many voters were infected or whether voters transmitted the virus to the workers. *See* David Smiley and Bianca Padró Ocasio, *Florida held its primary despite coronavirus. Two Broward poll workers tested positive*, MIAMI HERALD, Mar. 27, 2020, available at <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/politics-government/article241539451.html>.

The possibility of this occurring may seem remote to many, but the fear and impact on the recruitment and retention of election workers is very real. The recent election in Wisconsin demonstrated the difficulties surrounding conducting an election in the midst of a global pandemic. Wisconsin's largest city, Milwaukee has traditionally had 180 locations, but because of fear and apprehension of contracting COVID-19, election officials had staff and capacity to operate *only five* locations because of resignations and refusals to work under what they believed were dangerous conditions. *See* Spicuzza and Derr, *Why did Milwaukee have only 5 voting locations* MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL, April 10, 2020 available at <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/04/10/coronavirus-milwaukee-aldermen-want-answers-polling-places-primary-election/5127577002/>; *see also* Winn Decl. at ¶ 29.

In Texas, large counties would be particularly hampered by massive reductions in workforce given the large volume of voters they must accommodate. Simply put, Harris County

would be unable to conduct large-scale early vote and Election Day polling based upon concerns about poll worker and voter safety.

The risk of holding elections in Harris County would be significantly more acute because of the age of many of the election workers. The average of election workers in Harris County is currently 68 years old. Winn Decl. at ¶ 30. Approximately two-thirds of the election workers are over the age of 65. *Id.* The CDC has indicated that older persons are at particular risk of suffering greater illness and death rates from the COVID-19, and thus should take greater precautions to avoid contracting the disease. *See CDC, Older Adults, Apr. 7, 2020, available at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/older-adults.html>.* People over 65 years old are at a greater risk of hospitalization and requiring intensive care placing a greater strain on the health care system when outbreaks occur among this demographic. *See id.*

Harris County currently has over 750 voting center locations. Winn Decl. at ¶ 21. It requires more than 6000 workers at those locations to effectively administer an election. *Id.* Workers would be forced to decide between the possible risk to their lives through exposure or refusing to work resulting in the closure of many voting locations. The inability to have adequate staff to work at polling locations would result in significant closures of locations and a need to consolidate hundreds of locations. The resulting disruption would result in an even more crowded and chaotic voting process that would likely endanger the workers and voters alike, through even more exposure to a greater number of people at fewer locations, and as voters are forced to wait in longer lines risking greater exposure. Such conditions amount to voter suppression as voters leave polling locations because they do not want exposure to a potentially deadly virus or simply cannot wait any longer to vote, or they decide not to attempt to vote at all.

B. Fear of the potential prosecution for fraud results in reluctance of voters opting to exercise VBM option despite the likelihood of injuring voter’s health.

Despite strong evidence to the contrary, the Texas Attorney General’s Office has aggressively pursued allegations of voter fraud even where the accused’s intent was not to violate the law. For example, the Attorney General’s Office charged Crystal Mason, who was previously convicted of tax fraud and on probation with illegal voting in the 2016 General Election.¹ At the time she cast her ballot, Mason was still on probation and ineligible to vote, but was unaware of that status.² Despite this information, a judge found Mason guilty and sentenced her to *five years* incarceration.³

The AG’s Office also prosecuted Rosa Maria Ortega in 2017 for two counts of illegal voting.⁴ Between 2002 and 2014, Ortega voted in several elections even though she was not a U.S. citizen.⁵ Ortega moved to the United States as a child and was a legal permanent resident.⁶ At her trial, Ortega testified that she did not know she was unable to vote, and that she was unaware of the difference a U.S. citizen and legal permanent resident.⁷ Also, Ortega’s younger brother, a U.S. citizen, testified that he believed Ortega was a citizen.⁸ A jury found Ortega guilty and sentenced her to *eight years* incarceration.⁹

Because of heavy-handed prosecutions like these focused on female minorities, Texans can reasonably expect to be prosecuted for voter fraud even where they believe they are not engaging

¹ *State of Texas v. Crystal Mason*, Cause No. D432-1485710-00, 432nd District Court, Tarrant County, Texas.

² Amrit Cheng, *Crystal Mason Thought She Had the Right to Vote. Texas Sentenced Her to Five Years in Prison for Trying*, ACLU, <https://www.aclu.org/issues/voting-rights/fighting-voter-suppression/crystal-mason-thought-she-had-right-vote-texas>.

³ *Id.*

⁴ *State of Texas v. Rosa Maria Ortega*, Cause No. 1434155D, Criminal District Court No. 3, Tarrant County, Texas.

⁵ Sam Levine, *This Woman Got 8 Years In Prison For Illegal Voting. Texas Is Showing No Mercy*, HUFFPOST (November 30, 2018), https://www.huffpost.com/entry/texas-voter-fraud-prison_n_5c01a9afe4b0a173c02305c1

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

in unlawful activity. Because the Secretary of State has muddled the definition of “disability” with respect to being eligible to vote by mail, voters are more likely to believe that choosing to vote by mail due to COVID-19 will result in their criminal prosecution. Ultimately, such SOS-created ambiguity is likely to result in the suppression of votes by voters who would vote if this clarification was made.

C. The SOS-created legal ambiguity and lack of access to VBM will have a disparate impact on minority voters.

An analysis of national infection and mortality rates from COVID-19 has revealed a disturbing pattern that indicates that minorities may be more greatly impacted by the disease than the general population. Stacy Weiner, *The new coronavirus affects us all. But some groups may suffer more*, ASSOC. OF AM. MEDICAL COLLEGES, Mar. 16, 2020, available at, <https://www.aamc.org/news-insights/new-coronavirus-affects-us-all-some-groups-may-suffer-more>. According to preliminary data, African-Americans in particular are significantly more likely to contract and die from COVID-19. In Harris County, this trend seems to be continuing with higher than average contraction and fatality rates. Zach Despart, *Harris County releases first racial, ethnic breakdown of coronavirus deaths*, HOUS. CHRON., Apr. 9, 2020, available at [https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/harris-county-racial-ethnic-coronavirus-deaths-data-15189690.php?utm_campaign=CMS%20Sharing%20Tools%20\(Premium\)&utm_source=t.co&utm_medium=referral](https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/harris-county-racial-ethnic-coronavirus-deaths-data-15189690.php?utm_campaign=CMS%20Sharing%20Tools%20(Premium)&utm_source=t.co&utm_medium=referral). As a consequence, minority voters may be at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19 if they are unable to avail themselves of a vote by mail option.

The risk to minority voters in Harris County is particularly concerning when viewed in the context that they are less likely to be able to obtain a VBM ballot if a narrow application of the disability definition is applied. As stated above, Texas law allows any voter 65 years old or older

to receive a ballot by mail. *See* TEX. ELEC. CODE § 82.003. Harris County currently has 2,357,199 registered voters. *See* Tex. Sec. of State, *Harris County Voter Profile*, available at <https://www.sos.state.tx.us/elections/historical/harris.shtml>. More than 83% of those voters are under the age of 65. *See Harris County Registrar, Voter Demographics*, available at https://www.hctax.net/Voter/Voter_Demographic/VoterVisualization. Among those voters, a majority are African American or Hispanic voters, with over 70% of voters under the age of 40 are African-American or Hispanic. Winn Decl. at ¶ 10. Harris County is younger and more diverse than Texas as a whole. While 12.5% of Texans are over 65 years old, only 9.8% of Harris County residents are. *See* data.census.gov. Moreover, while approximately one-third of Texans are Anglo, only about 20% of Harris County residents are. *See id.* Because younger voters are more likely to be minorities in Harris County the lack of access to VBM will have a disparate impact on their access to a safe and fair election.

CONCLUSION

The ongoing threat of COVID-19 presents unique challenges that affect voting access throughout the country, but present particular challenges for the people of Texas and Harris County given their size and diversity. Clarity in determining the eligibility of VBM is critically needed as a potential remedy to the current problem of holding elections during a pandemic. Unfortunately, the SOS COVID-19 Advisory injected ambiguity into the otherwise plain language of the statute. Harris County and its Administrator of Elections need clarity as soon as possible in order to plan and implement safe and fair elections for the July run-off and the November general election. Moreover, Harris County voters need increased access to VBM, free of prosecution threats, in order to flatten the curve of voter congregation and of this pandemic.

Respectfully submitted,

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I hereby certify that a true and correct copy of the above Amicus Brief was served upon all counsel of record, via e-service and a courtesy e-mail on April 13, 2020 pursuant to TEXAS RULE OF CIVIL PROCEDURE 21a and the e-filing rules of this Court:

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COUNTY OF HARRIS

**DECLARATION OF MICHAEL WINN,
HARRIS COUNTY ELECTIONS ADMINISTRATOR**

My name is Michael Winn. My date of birth is October 11, 1958, and my address is 1001 Preston, Houston, Harris County, Texas, 77251-1525. I declare under penalty of perjury that the foregoing is true and correct:

1. I am submitting this declaration to explain election processes, current thinking on best practices for holding a safe and fair election during the COVID-19 pandemic, and toward that end, ways to spread out the volume of voters so that social distancing will be possible. Since the Election Code considers as a “disability” qualifying a voter to vote by mail (“VBM”) whether there is a “likelihood” that appearing in person to vote will “injur[e] the voter’s health.” See TEX. ELEC. CODE § 82.002. I believe all voters who qualify under this provision should be able to early vote by mail. This is a relief because much like flattening the curve of the pandemic’s spread, by increasing the ratio of VBM voters to in-person voters we can flatten curve of mass numbers of voters congregating to enable adequate social distancing or avoid contact all together. Consequently, we will be closer to providing a safe and fair election.

Credentials

2. I have worked in elections administration for more than twenty years. I began my elections career in Bexar County in 1997. Then I moved to Travis County where I started as an election specialist and became the Assistant Elections Administrator in 2008. In 2010, I was promoted to Elections Administrator where I served until 2018. In 2018, I moved to Harris County to take to job as the Administrator of Elections. As a result, I have served in various levels of

elections administration in the three largest counties in Texas assisting more than 27% of the Texas population to vote.

3. I hold a certificate as a Certified Election Administrator from the International Association of Government Officials and am very active in my profession serving in multiple elections administration organizations. I served as the President of the International Association of Clerks, Recorders, Election Officials and Treasurers (“IACREOT”) in 2015. I currently serve on the Board of Advisors to the Federal Elections Assistance Commission and have served in the following positions since my initial appointment in 2015: Secretary, Vice-President, and Board Chair.

4. I am also a member of the National Association of Elections Administrators (a.k.a. the Elections Center, <https://www.electioncenter.org>) where I also achieved certified election administrator status.

5. I serve on the bipartisan coalition committee of national elections administrators. We meet regularly to discuss challenges facing elections administration. I have been appointed on the International Association of Government Officials (“IAGO”) on the Government Coordinating Council of governments of federal, state, and local task force on election matters. I also serve as a representative on the Council of State Governments where we look at initiatives of overseas voting by mail.

6. On April 10, 2020, the Texas Secretary of State (“SOS”) formed a County Election Official Advisory Group including me and several county elections administrators throughout Texas to discuss the COVID-19 pandemic impact on elections administration, with bi-weekly meetings to begin on Wednesday, April 15, 2020.

7. When I am not actively working to plan and execute local elections, I study tactics and experiences from other jurisdictions to learn best practices and new innovations to conduct free and fair democratic elections. I am in regular, informal communications with my colleagues in other

jurisdictions, including those that have already implemented population-wide VBM like Oregon, Washington State, and Colorado.

Logistics of Planning an Election in the Best of Times

8. Elections are very complex to plan and implement in a democracy. The system must allow for *every* qualified voter to have effective access to a ballot and to cast their votes securely and privately. The larger and more diverse a community the more difficult this becomes. The greater the expected voter turnout, such as for a presidential general election, the greater the challenge. Multiple mechanisms of voting are useful as they are more likely to accommodate voters whether VBM, in-person voting during early vote or on Election Day, curbside voting for the disabled, and other accommodations for voters with special needs.

9. Deep analysis of past voting data is extremely helpful toward planning a given election, although voter behavior can be unpredictable especially when implementing new election or business processes. Consequently, the more lead time to accommodate any likely changes in voter behavior the better.

10. Harris County is the largest county in Texas and one of the largest in the United States with more than 4.7 million people and almost 2.4 million registered voters comprising approximately 14% of the registered voters in Texas. *See* data.census.gov; https://www.hctax.net/Voter/Voter_Demographic/VoterVisualization. Among those voters under the age of 65, a majority are African American or Hispanic voters, with over 70% of voters under the age of 40 are African-American or Hispanic.

11. I typically spend six to eight months to plan every general election, which includes (1) ascertaining the resources needed to conduct an election from equipment levels to staff funding, (2) itemizing the tasks to be completed before the election, (3) planning a timeline for deadlines and

tasks, (4) reviewing past election data from similar and like elections to determine the amount and geographic distribution of likely turnout, and (5) a myriad of other issues that may arise.

12. Budgeting is of course a crucial issue which is done through the county on an annual basis. While we have a special fund for unanticipated issues, using those funds requires commissioners' court approval which takes some time. Elections costs may also be partially funded by grants and other gifts, which also require commissioners' court approval. For the July primary run-off the Secretary of State approves funding as the state pays for primary elections. Consequently, changes in election and business processes should be supported by appropriate changes in funding.

The Non-Partisan Nature of VBM

13. In the experience of the Harris County Clerk's office VBM campaigns were almost exclusively a Republican strategy in Harris County until fairly recently. Our office tracks the source of the ballot requests; it has always been fairly easy to tell who was sponsoring these campaigns because of the design of the application requests. In addition, until recently, the number of mail ballots that cast straight tickets were disproportionately Republican until just these last few elections. Even in 2018, when 55% of the straight-ticket ballots overall voted Democratic and only 44% voted Republican; 51% of the mail ballots were Republicans to 49% for the Democrats.

The Vote-by-Mail Process

14. The typical VBM process contains many, heavily regulated steps. Texas law limits those who may obtain a ballot to VBM to those who are 65 years old or older, outside the county during the election, "disabled" or ill, or in confinement and not yet convicted of a felony. TEX. ELEC. CODE § 82.001-.004. About sixty (60) days prior to an election, our office conducts logic and accuracy tests to confirm that the correct races are on the ballot, candidate names are spelled correctly, precinct assignment and many other matters to ensure accuracy in the ballots themselves.

Voters can be on an annual list or can request a ballot by mail for individual elections. TEX. ELEC. CODE § 86.0015. Also, about sixty (60) days before each election, we start reviewing VBM request lists, checking them to ensure they are up to date.

15. Typically, annual requests are from military and overseas personnel, as well as some voters who are 65 or older. Others begin requesting ballots to VBM about 60 days prior to election. Often different campaigns send applications to their likely voters. Voters fill out the application, affix their own postage and rely on the U.S. Post Office (“USPO”) to deliver.

16. We print different ballot styles on demand as requests come in. I have had the luxury of working in counties where VBM ballots are printed on demand but I still must order sufficient ballot printing paper ahead of time. Some counties must determine the number of each ballot style needed ahead of time and order sufficient ballots printed for each style to accommodate their voting jurisdiction.

17. We send ballots out to voters on a continuous basis. Typically, about forty-five (45) days before an election, we first prioritize sending ballots to military and overseas voters, then to others who requested VBM.

18. After voters mark their ballot, they must place the ballot in a carrier envelope, seal it, and sign the outside. TEX. ELEC. CODE § 86.005. Voters may return their ballots by mail, common carrier, or in person. TEX. ELEC. CODE § 86.006(a). After voters send their ballot back into our office, a very labor-intensive process begins.

19. An early voting ballot board (“the Ballot Board”) processes the VBM ballots. TEX. ELEC. CODE § 87.001 *et seq.* The Ballot Board must review ballots that have been returned and verify signatures via its Signature Verification Committee. TEX. ELEC. CODE § 87.027. This is a manual ballot-by-ballot process conducted on a continuous basis during the early voting period. The

individuals who serve on the Ballot Board tend to have significant experience and, like most election workers, tend to be older.

20. Processing VBMs may require more staff than in-person voting depending on the turnout and ratio of VBM to in-person voting. Typically, in small elections, VBM is only about 5% of the total votes. But in a big election like a primary or general election, VBM may comprise 20% or more of the vote. For example, in 2020 primary VBM was 12% of the overall turnout while in the 2018 general election VBM was 8% of the turnout. Presidential years tend to produce a bit higher ratio of VBM. In a large VBM turnout, the sheer size of the volume of VBM requires more resources and staffing. For example, in 2018, there were 115,000 VBM processed in Harris County. In our 2020 election planning, we will shift staff resources accordingly in anticipation of a higher ratio of VBM.

Early Voting & In-Person Planning

21. Election planning also encompasses in-person early vote and Election Day voting. Approximately 120 to 90 days before the election, our office begins reviewing processes, securing polling locations, forecast staffing and other resources needs, signing up election workers, arranging to train those workers, and engaging in other planning. Our costs estimates are based on type of election from the general, to the primary, down to smaller political jurisdiction elections. For in-person voting, Harris County utilizes approximately 6,000 voters and for Election Day, 750 locations.

22. If there were a change in our election business process within six months of an election, the process is disrupted. The size of the effect of the change proportionately increases that disruption. The closer to an election that a change occurs, the more difficult — if not impossible — it is to adjust our planning, training, staffing, and allocation of resources in order to conduct a well-run election that does not disenfranchise voters.

23. The 2020 election was already subject to great challenges because of the repeal of straight-ticket voting. In Harris County where the ballot is extremely lengthy due to the number of races, straight ticket voting has the effect of speeding up the in-person voting process. Without it, we were anticipating voters needing significantly more time to vote from less than a minute to close to ten minutes per voter depending on the size of the election, resulting in longer lines and a need for more voting equipment to spread the voters out. This legal change adds to the challenge of conducting a safe and fair election during the COVID-19 pandemic and increases the pressure to encourage voters to use VBM as that gives them ample time to fill out their ballot.

VBM in a Pandemic

24. The COVID-19 pandemic presents an extremely difficult problem to election administrations. By increasing the ratio of VBM to in-person voting we can decrease the volume of early voting and Election Day voters. This will enable more social distancing in the polling places and thus a safer election for everyone. The pandemic will move faster than administrators can plan and implement; thus, sooner we have legal clarity on “disability” for VBM, the better.

25. VBM does not eliminate public health concerns. I have been researching and consulting with epidemiologists and other public health experts. As I understand it, the COVID-19 virus can live on a piece of paper for two to three days. Workers processing ballots will still need personal protective equipment (“PPE”) and sanitation resources.

In-Person Voting in a Pandemic

26. I have begun collaborating with other elections administrators to develop methods of making in-person voting safer. For example, identifying polling locations where there is space to socially distance to ensure safety of poll workers and voters alike, not to mention poll watchers. Many of our current locations are cramped spaces in churches or nursing homes. Also, we must avoid vulnerable polling places such nursing homes, and Harris County historically uses many. For

the upcoming elections we need to shift to large spaces such as gymnasiums. This will require consolidating polling places as there are fewer large space locations. The days of going to small community-based polling locations are off the table because of COVID-19 as they do not have the space required to spread out. By consolidating to larger locations we will enable appropriate social distancing. The location sourcing may have to forego the traditional politically-driven allocation of polling locations.

27. Curbside voting offers little assistance to the pandemic problem, although it is a necessary element to any election to accommodate those voters who cannot walk inside the polling place and did not vote by mail. With Harris County's voting system, each curbside voter takes at least 15 minutes because we must disconnect a unit from main system, take it to the voter, wait for the voter to vote, and then reconnect it. Because of the design of the Hart Intercivic e-Slate system Harris County currently uses, only certain, limited units can be used for curbside voting. Those same machines may be used for other voters, but the converse is not true. Our current machines would not enable full-time curbside voting; thus, wide-scale curbside voting is not an option for Harris County or perhaps any county given the extra time it takes. Because curbside voting is necessary for certain voters with disabilities, we may have to limit access to those specialized units to those voters.

28. More space, PPE, and sanitation resources are needed for disabled voters and for the devices that such voters use because these devices touch the body to enable them to vote.

29. Last minute changes to the process contributed to the mass confusion of the recent Wisconsin primary and public health dangers of voters congregating in long lines. That example should urge the Court to make a quick decision so that I and other elections administrators can properly plan for the July primary run-off and the November general election.

30. I have deep concerns for the safety of election workers. Harris County's election workers' average age is 68 years old — the very age bracket at highest risk of serious illness or fatalities with COVID-19. Of all Harris County election workers about two-thirds are over the age of 65. For in-person voting, workers must set up equipment before voters touch it, then again and after mass numbers of voters have touched the machines. Workers must pass identification cards and paperwork back and forth with voters.

31. While recruiting younger, healthier poll workers may seem an attractive solution to the likelihood of traditional poll workers declining to participate due to fears for their health and safety, young people die of COVID-19 too. Moreover, recruiting new workers increases the need for more intensive training and leaves in-person voting locations with less experienced staff. Without increased VBM, we will not have the staff necessary to accommodate the volume of in-person voters.

32. Acquisition of PPE, sanitizers, plexiglass shields, and other equipment to minimize the spread of disease will take time and needs consolidating. Having 254 counties each trying to requisition material in the current competitive climate rife with price-gouging and fraud, would be a disaster and likely ineffective, and leave workers and voters exposed to the virus.

Timing of Legal Answers

33. As noted, we must test processes before going into battle. While 90 to 120 days' notice of legal or process changes is survivable, I very much prefer 180 days given my experience in planning and implementing elections for the past 20 years. For the July 14, 2020, runoff election, I need a clear legal answer on the plain meaning of Section 82.002 *as soon as possible* in order to conduct appropriate planning, such as looking for supplies, infrastructure, resources, etc. If election administrators and voters have the legal clarity that all voters are eligible for VBM for the July 14, 2020, runoff election, then we will have the added benefit of invaluable data for planning for the

November 2020 general election should the pandemic continue or resurge this fall. Given the size of the November election and uncertainties of the ebb and flow of the COVID-19 pandemic in Texas, I also need to know now whether all voters are eligible to VBM so that we can plan and muster resources for a safe and fair election.

Executed in Harris County, State of Texas, on the 13th day of April, 2020.



Michael Winn
Administrator of Elections
Harris County