



WISCONSIN LEGISLATURE

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Bipartisan bill to address elections during emergencies

MADISON, Wis. – State Reps. Joel Kitchens (R-Sturgeon Bay) and Staush Gruszynski (D-Green Bay) have introduced a bipartisan bill that will ensure Wisconsin is better prepared to hold an election that occurs during a public health emergency.

The provisions in LRB-6224 would go into effect if a governor declares a state of emergency and if the Wisconsin Elections Commission also approves of conducting an election consistent with the changes outlined in the proposed legislation.

LRB-6224 would encourage the residents of Wisconsin to utilize mail-in voting as much as possible, but it also requires that some polls remain open so the state's same-day voter registration law can be preserved.

Under the proposal, the Elections Commission must send an absentee ballot application to every registered voter who does not have an absentee ballot application on file. Each municipality would also have to keep one polling place open for every 12,000 citizens of legal voting age who reside in that municipality.

In order to be counted, an absentee ballot must be delivered to a polling place or municipal clerk no later than 8 p.m. on Election Day. If the Elections Commission decides to extend the deadline for requesting an absentee ballot, the ballot must be returned to a municipal clerk no later than 4 p.m. on the Friday following the election. The bill also allows for the Elections Commission to waive the witness signature requirement in an emergency.

To help better guarantee they are not lost in the mail, the Elections Commission will be tasked with developing and implementing software that is integrated with the U.S. Postal Service to track absentee ballots from the day they are issued to the day they are returned.

“Proceeding with the April election during the COVID-19 pandemic came with its fair share of challenges and there was plenty of blame to go around,” Rep. Kitchens said. “Instead of dwelling on the past and pointing fingers, we decided to come together and seek sensible, bipartisan solutions to ensure that we will be in a better place if we have to hold another election in the middle of a state of emergency.”

“In the April election, we saw 71 percent of voters choose to vote by absentee ballot,” Rep. Gruszynski added. “Those numbers will be significant in November, especially if this trend continues and 70 percent of the Wisconsin electorate turns out, which is traditional for a presidential election. This bipartisan bill focuses on common ground and not disagreement. We know that's critical because our local clerks need more help and tools if emergency orders are in place.”

The bill was drafted in consultation with the Wisconsin Elections Commission and is also authored by Sen. Kathy Bernier (R-Chippewa Falls).