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## **DISABILITY ADVOCATES DECRY ELECTION LEGISLATION THAT RESTRICTS ACCESS TO THE BALLOT BOX FOR TEXANS WITH DISABILITIES**

**AUSTIN, TEXAS**--As the Texas House forges ahead with election legislation that would further restrict Texans' right to vote, on top of the Texas Senate passing additional restrictions last week, disability advocates urge state leaders to ensure all Texans can safely cast their ballots securely and without undue barriers for Texans with disabilities.

House Bill 6, which passed the House Elections Committee today, and Senate Bill 7, which passed the Senate April 1, are two major bills of many pending in the Texas Legislature that would impose severe barriers to the ballot for all Texans and are especially burdensome for voters with disabilities.

"Nineteen years ago, I lost my sight and my hearing in my right ear following a severe case of meningitis and long hospitalization. So, overcoming challenges is not new to me," said **Kenneth Semien, President of the Board of Directors for the Coalition of Texans with Disabilities**. "Yet, the barriers to voting that the Texas Legislature are constructing leave me disappointed and extremely concerned about the direction our state is headed."

All Texans would face new inconveniences in casting a ballot under the proposed reforms to Texas Election Law in HB 6 and SB 7, adding restrictions and limits on the days, hours, and early voting locations. Advocates are acutely concerned that these bills disproportionately impact voters with disabilities.

Voters needing assistance to complete their ballot would face new documentation requirements for their selected assistants. Assistants would face new strict criminal penalties for failing to comply with the new documentation and sworn oath requirements.

"If we're serious about 'election integrity' and defending all voters' access to the ballot box, bills like HB 6 and SB 7 should be roundly rejected in their present form," said **James Meadours, a past president of Texas Advocates**, an organization that advances policies supporting Texans with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

"We should protect, not restrict, the rights of all Texans -- including those with disabilities -- to participate fully in our elections," said **Mark Cundall, a member of REVUP Texas and vocal advocate for disabled voting rights**.

“We must ensure that blind, deaf and deafblind voters and those with mobility impairments have access to mail-in ballots in a way that allows them to cast their votes privately and securely,” said **Ricky Harris, a community leader and advocate for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing**. “We hope our state leaders rethink their actions and work to make voting safe, secure and accessible for every Texan.”

In addition to limiting hours for early voting, Senate Bill 7 would create new, confusing documentation requirements for voters to receive assistance, an action roundly rejected by Texas voters according to [a March 2021 poll of Texas voters by Secure Democracy](#).

Senate Bill 7 would also create additional barriers for community organizations to provide needed information and assistance to voters, particularly related to vote by mail. Polling found that [81% of Texas voters](#) wanted voters to receive necessary assistance in completing their ballots. Texas already restricts voting by mail to voters who can satisfy a limited set of conditions, making Texas one of only 16 states that does this.

HB 6 would allow for the prosecution of individuals assisting voters for criminal offenses if they fail to complete new, confusing documentation when assisting voters or violate an oath barring words, signs and gestures, common ways to cue persons with disabilities. The legislation would also allow for the prosecution of members of community organizations who assist a voter in casting their ballot in person or by mail.

The Coalition of Texans with Disabilities says Texas lawmakers should reject HB 6 and SB 7, but embrace smart-minded reforms that encourage access, promote security, and provide transparency in our elections.

“We can strengthen our elections and empower voters by supporting ballot tracking so voters can check the status of their votes submitted by mail,” added Semien. “We must also defend against faulty policies around mail-in ballot signature verification to ensure voters have an opportunity to cure their ballot before an election, if a discrepancy is found.”

CTD pointed to proposed legislation by Rep. Gina Hinojosa (HB 1464), Sen. Judith Zaffirini (SB 1018), and Rep. John Bucy (HB 3874) that would strengthen access to the ballot box for Texans with disabilities.

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