

## Fact Sheet

### Status of State and County Efforts to Implement the Pennsylvania Voter Registration Act

In 1997, the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee issued a report on problems encountered in implementing the Pennsylvania Voter Registration Act (PVRA), a 1995 law to bring the Commonwealth into compliance with the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) of 1993. In 1999, the Committee authorized a follow-up study to determine the status of Commonwealth and county implementation of the PVRA.

#### Findings:

- **State agencies and county registration offices have made significant progress in their efforts to administer the PVRA.** The Commonwealth and the US Dept. of Justice recently took important steps toward resolving legal challenges regarding state compliance with the NVRA. (pp. 3-9) PennDOT, which made changes to its motor voter procedures in 1997, now accounts for 59% of all voter registration transactions. (pp. 9-10) Fifty counties have new or enhanced computer systems to administer the PVRA, and 46 counties were doing an annual check of their registration files as of September 1999. In 1996, only 22 counties had conducted or were in the process of conducting an annual check of their voter registration files. (pp. 11-13)
- **County registration offices have problems because of US Postal Service requirements and PennDOT address policies.** Residents of sparsely populated areas often have rural route delivery addresses or use post office boxes as their official address. Such addresses cannot, however, be used for voter registration purposes. (pp. 14-24) Also, zip code designations, which PennDOT uses at times to identify a voter's county of residence, frequently cross county lines. Changes of address, therefore, sometimes go to the wrong county. (pp. 24-27)
- **Voter registration offices do not have a unique personal identifier for each registered elector, making it difficult for them to use some of the information PennDOT sends them.** PennDOT identifies individuals by their Social Security numbers. County voter registration offices, however, are prohibited from using Social Security numbers and must therefore rely on names, birth dates, and signature comparisons. Not having a unique identifier can make it difficult to update voter records and increases the chances of having two voter registrations for one person. (pp. 28-30)
- **Not all county registration offices have the resources they need to administer the PVRA.** Although only 7 registration offices reported not having received any form of assistance to administer the PVRA, the amounts of assistance in the other counties varied. Twenty reported they were not doing an annual check of their registration files. (pp. 31-33)
- **The PVRA imposes more procedural requirements than the NVRA for removing inactive voters.** The PVRA requires counties to conduct an annual check of electors' addresses but the NVRA requires only a "reasonable effort" to remove ineligible voters, contains no mandatory method or schedule, and requires only one mailing in some situations where the PVRA calls for multiple mailings. The PVRA also requires counties to use death certificate reports from the PA Dept. of Health for canceling the registrations of deceased voters. Someone who dies in another county may not be included in the report sent to the county where he/she is registered to vote. Several states, including Florida, Ohio, and New Jersey, have confidentiality laws that preclude their providing death certificate information to other states for voter registration purposes. PA residents who die in these states are therefore not listed on the DOH reports. (pp. 34-41)

**Recommendations:** The report contains 10 recommendations (pp. S-10 through S-12), including:

- The Department of State should continue its efforts to promote coordination between the US Postal Service and county registration offices, revise its September 1996 PVRA manual, and work with the counties to re-examine the feasibility of a statewide computerized voter database.
- PennDOT should continue identifying and trying to resolve address problems and continue developing a guide to its procedures for voter registration officials.
- PennDOT and the Department of State should develop systems for documenting motor voter problems and assuring the timely reporting of address changes to the correct county.
- The General Assembly should consider reimbursing counties for their additional postage costs under the PVRA and should consider amending the PVRA to make its registration check requirements and its permissible information sources (e.g., newspaper obituary notices) consistent with the NVRA.