

Melissa Stiehler
Resident of Topeka, Kansas
Opponent Testimony of HB2057
For the House Elections Committee

January 31, 2023

Chair Proctor and Members of the Committee,

Thank you so much for the opportunity to provide testimony today. I am a resident of Topeka, Kansas and I am deeply opposed to HB 2057, which would arbitrarily restrict secure advanced ballot drop boxes and make the right to vote needlessly more difficult for many Kansans.

As it currently stands, Kansas counties are able to adjust their early voting resources according to the needs of their own community. Most counties offer opportunities for evening and weekend in person early voting, and supplement that with secure remote ballot drop boxes outside of business hours and in a variety of locations through their counties. Advanced ballot drop boxes play an important role in our early voting process so casting a ballot is accessible to voters regardless of what part of the community they live in, what their schedule is like, or what their access to transportation is.

In Shawnee County, where I live and vote, this is not the case. The only in person early voting opportunities are at the county elections office, during their business hours. There is an advanced ballot drop box in this office, which is inaccessible when the office is closed. During the peak of the pandemic in the 2020 election, there were drive through locations where election staffers collected mail ballots to put in secure drop boxes. I don't know many people who used this option because it was too complicated to try to guess where these pop up locations would be and when- since the schedule for them was sporadic and not easily accessible unless you knew where to look or who to ask.

Effectively, Shawnee County has already implemented the restrictions proposed in HB2057 and as the voter who is impacted by them I can personally attest that they are terrible. I have never lived somewhere where it was so difficult to vote early. Here is what it is like for voters like me:

For the 2022 General Election I opted to go vote early in person at the elections office, which is the only early voting location and also the only location where there was an advanced ballot drop box. I live about 5 minutes from the statehouse. To get from my home to the elections office is either a 50 minute one way bus ride, or a 33 minute one way bus ride with an additional 20 minute walk. While it's only about a 15 minute car ride, the cost of a ride share like Uber is about \$20 one way without tipping your driver. The

office had extended its hours during weekdays to be open until 7pm, but due to the limited bus routes available, many voters would have to leave their jobs before 5 pm to make it to the elections office before they closed. From my house, the latest I could leave to get there on time would be around 5:30 and that would require me to walk nearly a mile to the right bus stop, and would still require another hour trip home.

For the 2022 Primary Election, I was unable to vote early because of the combination of a hectic work schedule and the inconvenience of voting early in Shawnee County. As I've already mentioned, in Shawnee County dropping off an advanced mail ballot in a secure drop box is just as difficult as voting early in person, so I opted to vote on election day. I tested positive for COVID the weekend before election day and was still very, very sick on August 2nd. Because I was most certainly still contagious, I took myself to go vote curbside. I called the county election office in advance to advise me on how to do this, to which they said to just show up and they would call my polling place to let them know I was on my way. When I arrived, there was no sign designating where to vote curbside and how to contact the poll workers inside. I ended up having to call over another voter to ask her to alert the poll workers that I was here. The process was chaotic and confusing for both me and the election workers. It took over an hour to vote, while I sat in my car with a fever of 103.

One may say that these stories could prove that if there's a will, there's a way- that if someone wants to vote they will do everything in their power to make sure they cast their ballot- but I hope you take away a different lesson from these stories. Exercising your sacred right to vote does not need to be this difficult. Elections with restrictions such as those proposed in HB2057 make voting more confusing and more expensive for both the voter and our local election officials.

Every single one of you was elected in a safe and secure election with your constituents having access to vote by secure advanced ballot drop boxes. The majority of Kansas voters have a system to vote that meets the needs of their own communities, and is far better than the one that would be mandated by the legislature if HB2057 were to pass.

In closing, I ask you to please oppose HB2057 and any legislation that restricts the use of secure advanced ballot drop boxes. Thank you all for your time and I hope you take my testimony and the impact these restrictions would have on your constituents into consideration. I am happy to stand for questions when appropriate.