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Chairman Knodl and members of Committee on Shared Revenue, Elections and Consumer Protection,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of Senate Bill 685. My name is Sharon Bemis. In the past five years, I have served as a municipal clerk and voter registrar who administered municipal, state, and federal elections, led volunteer observer teams as an Election Integrity State Director, and I am now a Policy Analyst with the Election Protection Project.

I am writing today in support of Senate Bill 685. I believe that Monday early processing and the provisions surrounding its application, although another task for the municipal clerks to learn, will add to the transparency in the election process and further restore the faith in elections in Wisconsin.

As a former municipal clerk, I can attest to the advantage of having early processing of absentee ballots prior to Election Day. Many people do not realize that elections, while essential, are not the only duties of municipal clerks. Clerks have multiple essential functions which they perform throughout the year in addition to elections. And for many, keeping up with new laws and guidance can be overwhelming. Having additional days prior to Election Day, even if it is just one day as proposed in this bill, provides the municipal clerks the ability to focus on thoughtfully reviewing absentee ballot returns, verifying voter’s eligibility, and processing returned ballots. Without early processing days, clerks are forced to process absentee ballots during the chaos on Election Day while voters are voting in-person, last minute absentee ballots are being returned, and observers are attempting to track all the activities going on.

The mid-term elections in 2022 showed Wisconsin returning to a more traditional use of absentee ballots with 28.6% of the ballots being returned by mail. Even so, there is growing interest in addressing the issues caused by waiting until Election Day to process mail-in ballots. In Wisconsin, participation rates of absentee voting have decreased from 59.5% in 2020 to 28.6% in 2022. Taking these percentages into consideration, I am confident a single full day of early processing should be sufficient time for clerks to process ballots received by Monday.

When I recruited, trained, and placed observers at polling locations on Election Day, I also worked with seasoned election professionals to develop a training program for observers to take part in the early processing of absentee ballots. I participated in the observation of early processing of absentee ballots at our state’s capital, during the 2022 General Election. I was able to collaborate with the municipal clerk and her team during processing. Our teams of observers had the ability to review returned envelopes prior to them being opened and look for discrepancies. We found a few discrepancies which were addressed immediately, and the resolutions were discussed in front of our volunteer team. The whole process was very transparent and gave the volunteer observers the ability to get to know the election workers and ultimately have a better appreciation of all the work that they had ahead of them.

Transparency builds confidence in the election process among all stakeholders from candidates to parties, and ultimately the voters. To be a free people, we must have free elections, and our citizens must have confidence in the safety and security of their ballots. Having transparency in the election process increases that confidence, and being able to report election results more quickly will also boost confidence in our elections. That confidence is fundamental to the maintenance and defense of our democracy.  As we like to say at the Election Protection Project, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”.

Senate Bill 685’s focus on both efficiency and security reflects a balanced approach to election reform. However, its successful implementation will hinge on the allocation of adequate resources, comprehensive training for election officials, and rigorous enforcement of security measures.

I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to submit my written testimony in favor of the bill.