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Gale A. Brewer, Borough President

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**Testimony for New York City Voter Assistance Advisory**  
**Committee Public Hearing**  
**May 17, 2016**

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Good evening. I am Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer and I would like to thank the Voter Assistance Commission for holding this hearing today.

I have long been an advocate of voting reform and for those specific rule and policy changes that could make voting more efficient and accurate. But before detailing some of these ideas, I must first address the recent election on April 19, 2016. By most accounts, this Primary Election was a disaster. Of course there is an ongoing controversy regarding the purging of thousands of voters from the election rolls. However other problems abounded.

A particularly upsetting problem was the lack of notification of changed polling places. While it may be necessary to change voters' polling places, this should never be done lightly. In this past election, voters were not sent notifications of new polling places, signs were not put up either in affected buildings or at former polling sites, and may poll workers did not know about the changes. Furthering this confusion was the fact that people attempting to vote were often given incorrect information. While from what I could tell, the voting apps and web sites established to inform people of their polling sites worked, poll workers did not have either on-site access to or training in using this technology. Poll workers continued to use books and papers which were either inaccurate or simply not used correctly.

Many of my constituents were sent to the wrong polling sites, only to have to return to their original site in search of their name in the books. This is particularly egregious when senior citizens with limited mobility are involved.

The City Council recently enacted legislation meant to rectify problems in notification of changed polling places and I look forward to seeing these changes in the next election.

However, other problems served to exacerbate the general confusion regarding polling sites. Many poll inspectors were missing, making it impossible for sites to function properly. Then the Board of Elections phones were down for several hours.

With nowhere to call for information or to report a problem, voters' difficulties in attempting to vote were compounded. And no contingency plan was in place.

New Yorkers living with disabilities also faced a range of problems this election, as in practically every election held in our city. This year, however, my office worked in conjunction with the Center for the Independence of the Disabled-NY to collect data on the accessibility of our polling sites.

Here is just a snapshot of our findings from the 128 primary day voters we polled:

- 16% faced confusing or missing signage pointing voters towards accessible entrances to polling sites.
- 17% found inaccessible paths to voting machines for voters who use wheelchairs
- Of voters who used Ballot Marking Device, 37% faced difficulties marking their ballots.

Moving away from the specifics of this past election, I have been advocating for a series of reforms that I believe can help the entire process in every election. Here are just a few ideas:

First, address issues concerning Poll Workers. Re-design poll worker training using standardized testing techniques, with a passing score. Create mechanisms such as evaluation sheets to better monitor poll workers and more aggressively follow-up with and hold underperforming poll workers accountable. Increase staffing at the Board of Elections to allow for better coordination of poll worker appointments. Increase pay for poll workers. Finally, work with the state bar to allow attorneys to receive pro-bono and CLE credit for time spent as poll workers.

Second, change the mechanics of voting. Eliminate or pre-print portions of voter cards. Institute a process of signing in by name rather than by election district. Explore the use of electronic poll books. Print poll site-specific street finders and maps.

Third, we need to increase accessibility of our polling places. This includes: (1) clearly marked signs in and around polling sites; (2) ensuring the proper training of polling workers; (3) and ensuring accessible paths to and through each polling site.

Finally, change the rules around voting altogether. While these recommendations require state action, they are important changes that would serve to better enfranchise voters and increase voter participation. The State should pass no-excuse absentee voting. It should change law such that voters who use affidavit ballots but do not make party affiliations during primaries are not disqualified. It should permit online voting registration and should enact same day registration.

There is so much to be done and I hope that we can commit to not only fixing problems, but actually enhancing our system of voting.