

“What About the 59rs?”

By Trupania Bonner

On the eve of the first day of early voting in New Orleans I noticed a local news feature on WVUE that stated, “400+ coronavirus cases reported for 3rd day in a row from the Louisiana State Department of health.” I ventured out on Saturday to provide safety support to voters by distributing masks and hand sanitizer, but it seemed eerily void. Early voting sites at City Hall and the Algiers courthouse were virtually empty. Are voters feeling a bit antsy about standing in potentially long lines to vote during this pandemic? I would be.

Community stakeholders age 55-65 who are most vulnerable to COVID-19 do not qualify for [absentee](#) voting under the Secretary of States Emergency Elections plan and must provide an excuse and seek a witness to sign. Based on GIS data provided by [Caliper](#), many polling locations in Orleans Parish are located in *Hard to Count Census* areas and those very same zones have a high population count of 'at-risk' residents.

On Monday June 22, 2020, U.S. District Judge Shelly Dick in a [decision](#) days before I was scheduled to testify alongside other [plaintiffs](#) in Louisiana, dismissed the consolidated lawsuits (with prejudice) upholding the emergency election plan. The judge is quoted as saying, “The court rejects plaintiffs' contention that they are being ‘forced to choose’ between their health and voting.”

I respectfully disagree.

Louisiana's Emergency Elections Plan ([EEP](#)) states, “The emergency conditions created by COVID-19, as well as the efforts necessary to contain its spread, will affect all 2,988,813 of Louisiana's registered voters as well as the 3,934 precincts located at 2,058 polling places across the State.” COVID-19, a pandemic so deadly Governor Edwards rescheduled spring elections and supported chief voting official Kyle Ardoin's initial proposed plan to allow absentee voting for all eligible residents who feared getting infected by the virus or passing it on.

Indeed, legislative leaders in Louisiana agreed to temporarily suspend their lawmaking session months ago *due to COVID-19*. Sen. Karen Carter Peterson [tweeted](#) that “it was irresponsible for the session to continue.” They later resumed and completed the Legislative session with many representatives choosing to not [attend](#).

As it turns out, 58,282 people cast [ballots](#) across the state on Saturday. Of those that did vote, 48,074 voted absentee. Based on stats provided by the Secretary of State Office, in every single Louisiana parish, the number of absentee votes significantly outnumbered those cast in person. An opinion poll provided to Crescent City Media Group by reputable pollster, Dr. Silas Lee, confirmed those [polled](#) strongly (55%) support no-excuse absentee voting. On another note, a combined 62% of residents polled have heard little or nothing (45%) at all about legislation to allow a vote by mail or not.

During *quarantine* many groups were providing [virtual](#) support to residents during the Census process, we are now compensating for the lack of promotion of new standards by producing PSAs, toolkits as well as providing masks and hand sanitizer to voters who may not meet the criteria to vote absentee.

It must be said that during early voting and/or primaries in [Georgia](#), [Chicago](#) and [Wisconsin](#) people experienced extremely long lines and some were infected in the process of voting, a few residents and poll workers have died.

Thirty-four states and Washington, D.C., do not require an excuse to [vote absentee or by mail](#). Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Utah, and Washington conduct elections entirely by mail.

On June 3, citing human error, Louisiana's voting chief [admits](#) that his office mistakenly left off about 300,000 eligible voters from a mailing list to receive a letter promoting the mail-in ballot program for seniors. Secretary of State staff members were told to filter a list of voters age 65 and older and remove anyone who was already voting by mail. Ultimately, they removed all of the targeted voters that ever requested an absentee ballot.

Louisiana and other states are now experiencing an uptick in [COVID-19](#) cases and deaths. Law makers should ‘do the right thing’, amend the Emergency Elections Plan, provide a public health-oriented process that allows everyone the right to safely cast their ballots. Supporting a less strenuous absentee balloting process, in the moment, means taking into consideration the continued threat of COVID-19 and protecting our most valued, vulnerable population.

Trupania Bonner is a filmmaker, demographer, community advocate and founder of Crescent City Media Group/Center for Civic Action based in Louisiana.