



**Testimony of Al Schmidt
Secretary of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania**

**The Committee on Rules and Administration of the United States Senate
Ongoing Threats to Election Administration
Wednesday, November 1, 2023**

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Klobuchar, Ranking Member Fischer, and members of the Committee on Rules and Administration. Thank you for inviting me to testify today on this important and timely topic.

I'm Al Schmidt, Secretary of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. As head of the Pennsylvania Department of State, which oversees the integrity of the electoral process in the Commonwealth, I am Pennsylvania's chief election official. Governor Josh Shapiro appointed me to this position in January of 2023.

The Shapiro Administration is committed to ensuring safe, secure, and fair elections in Pennsylvania. That commitment includes protecting Pennsylvanians' right to vote, improving the efficiency and transparency of our elections, and ensuring every legal ballot is counted.

When I last testified before this Committee on the topic of threats to election administrators, almost exactly two years ago, I was a Philadelphia City Commissioner who had overseen more than two dozen elections in nearly 10 years of public service. I was also one of many local election officials who experienced threats of violence directed at me and my family after the 2020 election. Now, as a statewide election official, I see the broader effects and consequences of those threats, including high turnover among experienced local election staff and the need for robust training efforts resulting from that turnover.

A survey of election officials commissioned by the Brennan Center in the spring of 2021 found that one in three officials felt unsafe because of their job, and nearly one in five officials identified threats to their lives as a job-related concern.¹

¹ https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/BCJ-129%20ElectionOfficials_v7.pdf

Violent threats increase in frequency and intensity every time elected officials and bad-faith actors spread disinformation about our elections.

The irony is our elections are more secure and accurate than ever before. As of the 2020 election, all 67 Pennsylvania counties have secure voting systems that provide a voter-verifiable paper record. Counties perform a scientifically based risk-limiting audit and a statutorily required 2 percent statistical sample to ensure the accuracy of election outcomes.

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania uses multiple layers of protection, including 24/7 continuous network monitoring, firewalls, encryption, password protection, multi-factor authentication, and continuity of operations planning, among other controls, to protect our systems.

We also work with local, state, and federal law enforcement and national security agencies -- including the Pennsylvania State Police, the FBI, and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security -- to monitor, identify, and mitigate emerging threats to election infrastructure. And we report any threats we become aware of to the appropriate law enforcement agencies.

Yet mis- and disinformation proliferate, in some cases fed by elected officials who should know better than to deceive their constituents and provoke some of them to make threats against the public servants who administer our elections.

The main targets of those threats are dedicated election workers laboring in local election offices to ensure that their fellow community members can cast their vote and make their voice heard in our democratic republic.

In addition to threats of physical violence, these election officials also have been subjected to frivolous lawsuits intended to harass or financially ruin them as they perform the public service of counting votes.

Such stresses have, undoubtedly, contributed to the remarkable turnover in local election officials that we've seen across the nation since 2020. Understandably, some of these officials have decided that a job that requires hard work and offers modest pay is hardly worth death threats to themselves and their families.

In Pennsylvania, we've witnessed nearly 70 county election directors or assistant directors in at least 40 of our 67 counties leave their positions since January 2020. While this total includes some planned retirements and departures for any number of reasons, it certainly represents a higher rate of turnover than we saw in the years leading up to 2020.

In response to this loss of experience and continuity among these nonpartisan public servants, the Shapiro Administration and the Pennsylvania Department of State have made it a top priority to help support and train new county election officials.

The Department of State has added several staff to the Division of Election Administration within our Bureau of Elections. Staff in this division are dedicated to communicating with county election officials and to creating helpful training materials, such as interactive webinars on voter list maintenance. They are working on rolling out additional tools, such as in-person trainings, an Election Day preparation manual, how-to videos, and more in the coming months.

As part of this education effort, we recently published on our website 10 updated election-related guidance documents for counties. Guidance documents and directives are a crucial way the Department ensures all 67 counties administer elections in a uniform, fair way across the Commonwealth. The Department also works with our federal and state security and law enforcement partners to provide training and tools to mitigate threats and combat mis- and disinformation.

We are doing our part, but we need the federal government to partner with us to help protect election administrators and, ultimately, our democratic institutions.

I commend Congress for revising the Electoral Count Act late last year to remove ambiguities about how electors are certified and electoral votes are counted. This change removes one of the incentives for a losing candidate to continue spreading disinformation about an election.

But we also need better funding of elections in general and grants specifically appropriated to secure election offices and operations. Our local election officials deserve to feel safe.

And we need a continued commitment to prosecute individuals who threaten election officials. Their threats are a direct attack on democracy.

Chairwoman Klobuchar, Ranking Member Fischer, and members of the Committee on Rules and Administration, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I applaud the steps you have already taken since the 2020 election to protect and support nonpartisan election administration. I urge you to continue to work across party lines to find common ground on election reform for the safety of the front-line heroes of our democracy – the local election officials who make it possible for the rest of us to vote. Thank you.