

Collier, state League of Women Voters to stop voter registrations, consider legal action due to election bill

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A national organization aimed at encouraging participation in government has said it will no longer register Floridians to vote after state lawmakers approved a sweeping overhaul to the state's election code.

Lydia Galton, president of the League of Women Voters of Collier County and director of the state board, said Monday that the Florida association decided to immediately stop voter registration efforts across the state after passage of House Bill 1355.

"While the league remains committed to empowering an active and informed citizenry, we cannot and will not place thousands of volunteers at risk, subjecting them to a process in which one late form could result in their facing financial and civil penalties," she said. "By passing House Bill 1355, the legislature has declared war on voters."

Galton said the decision to stop registering voters is a statewide initiative, and will be discussed at the state board meeting later this week. The League of Women Voters of Florida is "exploring legal remedies" to restore voter rights, she said.

The bill, passed last week and yet to be signed by Gov. Rick Scott, requires groups that sign up new voters register with the state, file regular reports and turn in completed voter-registration forms within 48 hours.

Anyone who doesn't turn in registration forms within that 48-hour time period could face a \$50 fine for each late form.

The bill also:

- Reduces the time for early voting from two weeks to one week, although it allows local elections officials to extend voting hours to a maximum of 12 per day.
- Forces voters who have moved from one county to another in Florida to use provisional ballots instead of regular ballots if they want to update their name or address at the polling place. A provisional ballot requires a person to later prove eligibility to vote for the ballot to count.
- Reduces the "shelf life" for signatures on petition drives from four years to two years.

Galton said her group took issue with all of those changes, but that the registration requirements and possible penalties would have the most significant impact on League of Women Voters members and volunteers.

The House voted 77-38 along party lines to pass the bill while the Senate had voted 25-13 earlier in the day. Paula Dockery of Lakeland and Mike Fasano of New Port Richey were the only Senate Republicans to break ranks and vote against it.

Rep. Kathleen Passidomo, R-Naples, said she thought there were “a lot of good things in the bill,” and said she felt the registration component would prevent fraud.

“There was, from what I understand, a lot of fraud with the registration process,” Passidomo said. “Whether it’s Democrats, Republicans or Independents, the concern was that no one should do an end run around the system.”

Passidomo said she didn’t focus on the registration aspect of the law when making her decision to support it. Instead, she said changes like limiting early voting to right before an election just made sense.

She also said she “didn’t have a problem” with asking people to use provisional ballots instead of regular ones if they need to change their name or address at the polling place because it could “preclude people from voting in more than one place.”

“I think the bill in balance was well thought out,” she said.

Rep. Matt Hudson, R-Naples, agreed.

“All this bill says is if you register someone to vote, you have to turn in a voter registration form in a couple of days,” Hudson said. “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that. I think there’s an efficiency in that.”

League of Women Voters officials disagree, and Galton said the changes to the election code are “suppressing voters” rights.

The League of Women Voters has registered voters for 91 years, and Galton said Monday that voter registration has “always been one of the major roles” of her organization.

There are more than 184,000 registered voters in Collier County, according to the Collier County Supervisor of Elections web site, and Tim Durham, chief deputy supervisor of elections, said the majority of those voters register through the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles.

“We believe we have quite a high registration rate and we know the most common means of registering is with (the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles),” Durham said. “They believe very strongly in what they do, but I think in our particular county ... I don’t think it will have a dramatic effect.”

The Associated Press contributed to this report.



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