



May 17, 2025

Monroe County Election Board
401 West 7th Street, Suite 100
Bloomington, Indiana 47404
Via E-mail

RE: Public Comment in Support of Monroe County Proposed Vote Center Plan

Dear Monroe County Election Board (“Election Board”):

Chicago Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights (“Chicago Lawyers’ Committee”) respectfully submits the following letter in support of the Vote Center Study Committee Plan Final Draft dated February 19, 2025 (“Proposed Vote Center Plan”)—in its current form—to equitably implement vote centers for Monroe County voters. When implemented effectively, vote centers can increase convenience and expand options for all voters. Chicago Lawyers’ Committee staff member Ami Gandhi is a Monroe County resident and a non-partisan member of the Monroe County Vote Center Study Committee.¹

Chicago Lawyers’ Committee is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working for more than 55 years to advance racial equity and economic opportunity for all, including in areas of voting rights, education, equitable community development and housing, and more. Chicago Lawyers’ Committee’s Midwest Voting Rights Program partners with community and grassroots organizations, especially in communities of color and low-income communities, to reduce barriers to voting and civic participation in Illinois and Indiana.

In Indiana, Chicago Lawyers’ Committee helps run the nonpartisan 866-OUR-VOTE hotline, where trained legal volunteers answer voters’ questions and help them overcome problems encountered while trying to vote. Our organization’s staff and pro bono volunteers have answered calls from Indiana voters for many years, including assisting hundreds of Hoosiers in the 2024 general election. We are proud to collaborate with voters, election officials, and poll workers to improve voter access. We appreciate your consideration of our input.

The Proposed Vote Center Plan increases access to voting and reduces the risk of voter confusion and barriers by converting precinct-based polling places to vote centers, maintaining the number of current polling places with very few changes to locations.

¹ This public comment is submitted by the Midwest Voting Rights Program team at Chicago Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights, including staff member Ami Gandhi. Ami, a resident of Monroe County, has also served individually as a nonpartisan member of the Monroe County Vote Center Study Committee.

In a vote center county, voters can cast a ballot at any convenient location that may be closer to home, the workplace, school, or elsewhere in the county while polls are open. This flexibility will reduce confusion and frustration among voters who currently are permitted to use only their assigned precinct-based polling place to vote – even if the location is far from their workplace or school.

Every election, many Hoosiers – including Monroe County voters – assigned to precinct-based polling places call the nonpartisan 866-OUR-VOTE hotline on Election Day after realizing they have arrived at the wrong polling place and, unfortunately, some voters realize this error too late to travel to the correct polling place in time to cast a ballot. By allowing voters to vote at any county voting location of their choosing, vote centers increase access and reduce the risk that voters will be turned away because of arriving to the wrong location.

We receive such reports of location confusion from a variety of community members, including people with long school or work hours, transportation barriers, childcare or health needs, or other factors that make it difficult or impossible to travel to another polling place, if there was a misunderstanding regarding the voter's assigned polling place location. And, because most Indiana counties have already adopted a vote center model, Monroe County can further reduce confusion for individuals who move here from another Indiana county and might presume that they are permitted to choose the county voting location that is most convenient to them. Ultimately, if designed and implemented well, vote center models have the potential to increase voter turnout and decrease voter confusion and frustration.

In some cases, becoming a vote center county could mean increased travel times to cast an in-person ballot for some voters – specifically those who walk or depend on public transportation to vote – if local, neighborhood, or community polling places close. The Proposed Vote Center Plan, as currently written, addresses this concern by converting all of the current 29 super-precincts into vote centers, with a few changes to locations based on building availability and accessibility.

The Proposed Vote Center Plan includes safeguards to ensure equity in changing to a vote center county.

By converting all 29 super-precincts into vote centers, with some slight location changes to improve accessibility, the Proposed Vote Center Plan as currently drafted will ensure voters throughout Monroe County continue to have equitable access to in-person voting options. The Proposed Vote Center Plan also accounts for unique challenges student voters may face by requiring at least one vote center located on or immediately adjacent to Indiana University Bloomington.

Many young voters lack reliable forms of transportation, such as a car, and it can be harder for them to access a polling place that requires them to travel. For example, during the Vote Center Study Committee's public meetings over the past several months, students eligible to vote in Monroe County recounted stories of, for example, having to take two city buses (rather than university buses) to get to their polling places – not only requiring a lot of time and inconvenience, but also requiring a mode of transportation that was unfamiliar to them and that could feel unsafe. Additionally, as Indiana University Bloomington is a major employer in the county, many staff

and faculty could find a university voting location more convenient and easily accessible to cast a ballot during Election Day hours.

Converting all 29 super-precincts into vote centers also allows for the Election Board to understand how and where people choose to vote. Monroe County voters may choose to vote at vote centers in ways that current turnout data about precinct-based polling place locations will not reflect. Voter behavior in a vote center model is likely to be different than the current precinct-based model. The Proposed Vote Center Plan also requires Monroe County to publish data regarding vote center usage and to have opportunities for public input regarding proposed changes to vote center locations before finalizing location changes. This type of data sharing and opportunity for public input ensures that future vote center plans are informed by data and community experiences.

Chicago Lawyers' Committee previously provided a legal analysis of including additional safeguards in a vote center plan and the plan's enforceability, located in Appendix I of the Proposed Vote Center Plan. In that memorandum, we note that vote center plans can – and should – include additional considerations, safeguards, or requirements that exceed existing state law requirements that communities may identify as important for their local interests. Many counties already go beyond the minimum state law requirements by adding more vote center locations than is required by law.

If adopting the Proposed Vote Center Plan, the Election Board should use clear and intentional communication throughout transitioning to a vote center county.

In adopting the Proposed Vote Center Plan, the Election Board should also engage in thoughtful and intentional community voter education over the course of multiple elections. Especially if changes are not communicated well, there is a risk that the transition to a vote center model could confuse, deter, or even block some eligible voters who have used the same polling place for years. However, the current Proposed Vote Center Plan accounts for this concern by converting all 29 super-precincts into vote centers with roughly the same geographic spread, so that people can continue to use many of the same polling places they have in the past, if they choose.

Like many other Indiana vote center counties have done, Monroe County should partner with local newspapers, radio stations, businesses, and local civic organizations and social media pages to get the word out about the change to a “vote anywhere” model, as well as vote center locations and days and times of voting.

Upon adopting a vote center model, if the Election Board closes any super-precincts or reduces the number of in-person voting locations in Monroe County, the Election Board must consider and guard against the negative consequences that are likely to follow. Specifically, voters may be confused about where they can go to vote, if not at the same place they have voted in previous years. If any current precinct-based polling places are closed, or if the number of available in-person voting options is otherwise reduced, it is essential for the Election Board to consider community concerns and work to reduce confusion and harm for Monroe County voters. For example, the state of Texas requires notice of the nearest vote center to be posted at any polling

place no longer being used as a polling location, if it was used as a polling place in the most recent general election.²

Further, the Election Board should consider and guard against any direct or indirect impacts on communities of color, if considering the closure of a current precinct-based polling place or a reduction in the number of voting locations. At the national level, Black, Hispanic, and Native American communities have experienced polling place closures at a higher rate than White voters.³ In Monroe County, there are unique demographics and community concerns, including in communities of color. Especially if the Election Board is considering any polling place location changes or reductions, we urge the Election Board to consider and guard against harm to particular communities, including communities of color, elderly voters, young voters, voters with disabilities, and rural voters.

Chicago Lawyers’ Committee supports the Proposed Vote Center Plan that includes safeguards and considerations to improve equity in adopting a vote center model in Monroe County—a plan that will benefit all Monroe County voters.

Sincerely,

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² Texas Election Code Title 4, Chapter 43.007(g) (“A county participating in the program must establish a plan to provide notice informing voters of the changes made to the locations of polling places under the program. The plan must require that notice of the location of the nearest countywide polling place be posted on election day at each polling place used in the previous general election for state and county officers that is not used as a countywide polling place.”).

³ “Why the U.S. Needs Equitable Access to In-Person Voting,” Campaign Legal Center, available at <https://campaignlegal.org/update/why-us-needs-equitable-access-person-voting>, citing “A Precinct Too Far: Turnout and Voting Costs,” Enrico Cantoni, *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 61–85 (Jan. 2020).