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January 22, 2018

The Honorable Dr. Rachel Levine, Acting Secretary
Pennsylvania Department of Health
8th Floor West
Health & Welfare Building
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17120

Dear Secretary Levine:

We are disheartened to be corresponding with the Department once again regarding the New Castle Division of Vital Records office. The Department's decision to end public services, such as providing birth and death certificates to citizens, was initiated without input from the public or their representatives in state government and without sufficient prior notification. We are mystified by the pattern of decisions emanating from our friends and dedicated public servants in the Wolf administration that further marginalize the men and women of suburban and rural Western Pennsylvania.

The Division of Vital Records has served the people of the greater New Castle area for more than 40 years. During that time, the Division outgrew its office, and in 2017 the Division understandably sought relocation to a larger space. Unfortunately, we have been informed by the Department that the new office is not configured to provide a public-facing window to conduct public business. We are glad to have kept the Division in New Castle through this transition, but we do not understand why the Department did not prioritize the need for a public space when it conducted its search for a new facility – unless the Department intended to end public interaction even before the move.

Timely access to vital records such as birth certificates has never been more important to Pennsylvanians. The implementation of the REAL ID Act requires citizens to present certain records, such as birth certificates, to acquire compliant driver licenses and other essential forms of identification. Creating barriers to those documents for the residents of the greater New Castle area is simply incompatible with our shared goals of reigniting a thriving economy and closing the widening socioeconomic gaps between our urban centers and our more rural communities. Residents of Lawrence and Mercer Counties will now have to travel 60 to 90 minutes to Pittsburgh to get vital records in person, at an office that may become overburdened with the additional workload.

The gulf between our home counties and Pittsburgh goes beyond physical distance; many more of our citizens lack affordable access to a reliable and responsive internet connection. It makes little sense to exacerbate the digital divide in this way. We understand the simple calculus that offices in major population centers such as Pittsburgh can use the fewest resources to serve the most people. However,

that formulation fails to consider another dimension in modern public service: residents of urban areas already have access to so many of the economic, cultural, and governmental opportunities that sustain and enrich lives. It's the folks in places like New Castle and Hermitage that are forced to spend hours on the Interstate to access the jobs, theaters, and administrative offices that comprise the civic life of our Commonwealth.

Too often, the voices of suburban and rural Pennsylvanians are drowned out in the public square. It is our responsibility, as representatives of those voices, to speak loudly and directly to those who can level the playing field for all Pennsylvanians. Unfortunately, in the matter of the Division of Vital Records, our voices were not sought out and a decision was made without any opportunity for discussion. We learned of the Division of Vital Records' new policy from our constituents or, if we were paying very close attention, from the fourth page of a Departmental update sent less than a month before public services were terminated in New Castle. In fact, that update from December 8, 2017, informed us that, before complete elimination, public hours would be curtailed effective November 13 – a date nearly one month in the past. Our voice wasn't asked for, and we had no opportunity to be heard.

Madame Secretary, we have seen your compassion in action. You have been a national leader in the fight against the devastating opioid epidemic. We know you care deeply about the health and well-being of every person in this Commonwealth. Yet the process by which this change to the Division of Vital Records policy was implemented ignored our voices and the voices of the hundreds of thousands of Pennsylvanians in Lawrence and Mercer counties. We ask you to reconsider the decision to end direct public service at the Division of Vital Records in New Castle, and we implore you to seek out and listen to the voices of the Pennsylvanians who will be impacted by future decisions of this type.

Thank you for your commitment and tireless work on behalf of the public.

Sincerely,



Rep. Chris Sainato
9th Legislative District
Lawrence County



Rep. Mark A. Longietti
7th Legislative District
Mercer County

CC: The Honorable Will Danowski, Secretary, Governor's Office of Legislative Affairs
Mr. Neil Malady, Director, Office of Legislative Liaison, Pennsylvania Department of Health