STATE OF WISCONSIN ELECTIONS COMMISSION

COMPLAINT FORM

Please provide the following information about yourself: Name Brian Peters Address _ 5050 S. 41st Street, Greenfield, WI 53221 Telephone Number <u>414-937-5912</u> E-mail bpeters@independencefirst.org State of Wisconsin **Before the Elections Commission** The Complaint of Brian Peters ______, Complainant(s) against Jennifer Goergen, City Clerk for the City of Greenfield ______, Respondent, whose address is 7325 W. Forest Home Ave., Room 102, Greenfield, Wisconsin 53220 This complaint is under Wis. Stat. 6.87(6) (Insert the applicable sections of law in chs. 5 to 10 and 12 and other laws relating to elections and election campaigns, other than laws relating to campaign financing) **Brian Peters** , allege that: Please see attached Complaint and supporting documents.

individuals who may have information related to the complaint. Use as many separate pages as needed and attach copies of any supporting documentation.) Date: August 14, 2023
Complainant's Signature I, Brian leters

, being first duly sworn, on oath, state that I personally read the above complaint, and that the above allegations are true based on my personal knowledge and, as to those stated on information and belief, I believe them to be true. Complainant's Signature STATE OF WISCONSIN County of Milwaukee, (county of notarization) Sworn to before me this 14 th day of (Signature of person authorized to administer oaths) My commission expires 11-17-26, or is permanent. Notary Public or ______ (official title if not notary)

(Set forth in detail the facts that establish probable cause to believe that a violation has occurred. Be as specific as possible as it relates to dates, times, and individuals involved. Also provide the names of

Please send this completed form to:

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P.O. Box 7984

Madison, WI 53707-7984

Fax: (608) 267-0500

Email: elections@wi.gov

WISCONSIN ELECTIONS COMMISSION

BRIAN PETERS

Complainant,

v.

Case	N_0	
Case	17()	

JENNIFER GOERGEN, CITY CLERK FOR THE CITY OF GREENFIELD, WISCONSIN,

Respondent.

COMPLAINT

Pursuant to Wis. Stat. § 5.06, Brian Peters alleges under oath as follows:

- 1. The Wisconsin Constitution vests the authority to create and amend election laws, including laws pertaining to the absentee ballot process, in the Legislature, subject to the Governor's veto. Wis. Const. art. III, § 2; Wis. Const. art. V, § 10; State ex rel. La Follette v. Kohler, 200 Wis. 518, 548, 228 N.W. 895 (1930). Those laws prescribe a comprehensive system for requesting, returning, and counting absentee ballots. See generally Wis. Stat. ch. 6, subch. IV; Teigen v. Wis. Elec. Comm'n, 2022 WI 64, ¶178, 403 Wis. 2d 207, 976 N.W.2d 519 (Hagedorn, J. concurring) (referring to Wisconsin's 1915 "comprehensive absentee voting law").
- 2. The Wisconsin Elections Commission (WEC) has previously instructed election officials, including municipal clerks, that they cannot impose "additional

requirements not provided by state or federal law that impact the civil and constitutional rights of voters."1

3. As described below, however, the City of Greenfield has created additional hurdles beyond those contemplated in Wisconsin's election code for absentee voters and designated ballot return assistants delivering ballots to their polling places on Election Day, contravening state law.

PARTIES

- 4. Complainant Brian Peters is a qualified elector who resides with his wife, Jennifer Peters, in the City of Greenfield, Wisconsin. Wis. Stat. § 6.02. Mr. Peters has assisted Mrs. Peters, a voter with a disability who often requires ballot return assistance, in returning her absentee ballot since 2022.
- 5. Respondent Jennifer Goergen is the City Clerk for the City of Greenfield, Wisconsin. Clerk Goergen's principal place of business is located at 7325 W. Forest Home Avenue, Room 102, Greenfield, Wisconsin 53220. Clerk Goergen is an election official as defined by Wis. Stat. § 5.02(4e). See also Wis. Stat. §§ 7.15(1), 5.02(10).

BACKGROUND

6. Pursuant to long-standing Wisconsin Supreme Court precedent, prior to 2022, all absentee voters in Wisconsin could have a third party return their absentee ballot in person to their municipal clerk prior to Election Day, and those

¹ WEC, Face Coverings on Election Day, available at https://elections.wi.gov/node/1221; see also WEC, Face Coverings While Voting and Conducting Elections (July 31, 2020), available at https://elections.wi.gov/media/11301/download.

ballots would be counted. Sommerfeld v. Bd. of Canvassers of the City of St. Francis, 269 Wis. 299, 301, 69 N.W.2d 235 (1955), limited by Teigen, 2022 WI 64, ¶¶79–82.

- 7. Previous WEC guidance reflected this long-held understanding of Wisconsin law, including guidance to clerks issued in the Spring of 2020 that stated, "[a] family member of another person may ... return the [absentee] ballot on behalf of a voter." *Teigen*, 2022 WI 64, ¶6.
- 8. On January 20, 2022, following an oral ruling the week before, the Circuit Court of Waukesha County issued a written order, holding in part that, "the only lawful methods for casting an absentee ballot pursuant to Wis. Stat. § 6.87(4)(b)1. are for the elector to place the envelope in containing the ballot in the mail or for the elector to deliver the ballot in person to the municipal clerk." *Teigen v. Wis. Elec. Comm'n*, No. 2022AP91 (Wis. Cir. Ct. Waukesha Cty. January 20, 2022).
- 9. Following the Circuit Court's order in *Teigen* and the expiration of a stay from the court of appeals, there was widespread confusion for voters and clerks during the April 5, 2022 Spring Election.²
- 10. On July 8, 2022, the Wisconsin Supreme Court issued its decision in *Teigen*, which held that "[a]n absentee ballot must be returned by mail or the voter must personally deliver to the municipal clerk at the clerk's office or a designated alternate site." 2022 WI 64, ¶4. The decision did not address whether a voter may

² See Emilee Fannon, "If you put your ballot in here, it won't be counted": Court order creates confusion for clerks, voters ahead of April 5, CBS 58 (March 30, 2022), available at https://www.cbs58.com/news/if-you-put-your-ballot-in-here-it-wont-be-counted-court-order-creates-confusion-for-clerks-voters-ahead-of-april-5th.

have assistance in mailing their absentee ballot, or how the ruling can be reconciled with federal protections for voters with disabilities. Id., ¶¶5, 84–86.

- 11. The August 9, 2022 election occurred one month after the Court released the *Teigen* decision. During this election, questions surrounding ballot return assistance for disabled voters remained unanswered.
- 12. Three weeks later, on August 30, 2022, the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Wisconsin issued its decision in *Carey v. Wisconsin Elections Commission*, which reaffirmed the right of voters with disabilities to receive assistance in all steps of the absentee process, including ballot delivery. 624 F. Supp. 3d 1020 (W.D. Wis. 2022).
- 13. WEC has consistently stated that voters may return absentee ballots to their polling location on Election Day.³
- 14. Following the *Carey* decision, WEC issued additional guidance affirming the right of voters with disabilities to use ballot return assistance pursuant to the federal Voting Rights Act.⁴

³ WEC guidance during all relevant periods has stated that absentee voters and designated ballot return assistants may return absentee ballots to their polling location on Election Day, except in municipalities which use a central count procedure, which does not apply to Greenfield. WEC, How to Turn In Completed Absentee Ballot? Wisconsin Elections, September 11, 2020, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MgMfkFbR6UM; WEC, Polls in Wisconsin Close at 8 p.m., August 15, 2022, available at https://elections.wi.gov/node/212, WEC, Polls in Wisconsin Close at 8 p.m., July 5, 2023, available at https://elections.wi.gov/node/212.

⁴ WEC, Guidance on Absentee Ballot Return Options Under the Federal Voting Rights Act, September 7, 2022, available at https://elections.wi.gov/memo/guidance-absentee-ballot-return-options-under-federal-voting-rights-act.

15. As the election officials with "charge and supervision of elections" in their municipalities, municipal clerks are responsible for implementing Wisconsin election law. Wis. Stat. § 7.15(1).

STATEMENT OF FACTS

- 16. Jennifer Peters is a long-time voter in the City of Greenfield who often relies on her husband, Complainant Brian Peters, for ballot return assistance due to a disability.
- 17. On August 3, 2022, Mrs. Peters emailed the office of Respondent, the City Clerk of Greenfield, stating that she required ballot return assistance for the August 9, 2022 election due to her disability. Specifically, Mrs. Peters designated Mr. Peters to return her absentee ballot. A true and correct copy of this communication is attached as Exhibit 1.
- 18. Clerk Goergen's office received this communication and provided an accommodation by documenting that Mrs. Peters designated Mr. Peters as her ballot return assistant. A true and correct copy of this communication is attached as Exhibit 2.
- 19. Mr. Peters then searched for instructions on how to return an absentee ballot on MyVoteWI, which stated: "Take [the absentee ballot] to *your assigned polling place* or absentee counting location on Election Day" (emphasis added).⁵
- 20. The City of Greenfield's website conflicted with WEC guidance. Greenfield stated that: "[Absentee] ballots can be hand delivered to the Greenfield

⁵ MyVote Wisconsin, *Vote Absentee*, available at https://myvote.wi.gov/en-us/Vote-Absentee-Guide.

City Clerk's office... and must be received no later than 7:00 p.m. on Election Day, Tuesday, August 9, 2022 to allow for timely delivery to the polls no later than 8:00 p.m."

- 21. On the morning of Election Day, August 9, 2022, Mr. Peters followed WEC guidance and brought Mrs. Peters' absentee ballot to their polling place, Adoration Lutheran Church, 3840 W. Edgerton Avenue, Greenfield, WI 53221.
- 22. At the polling place, election staff told Mr. Peters that he must go to the City Clerk's office to return Mrs. Peters' ballot and that voters could not deliver absentee ballots to the polling place due to a change in state law.
- 23. Mr. Peters then drove from the polling place to the City Clerk's office, which is three miles away.⁷
- 24. At the Clerk's office, staff confirmed that Mrs. Peters designated Mr. Peters as her ballot return assistant.
- 25. The Clerk's office then accepted Mrs. Peters' ballot from Mr. Peters and later delivered the ballot to the polling place where it was counted.
- 26. After Election Day, on August 15, 2022, Mr. Peters contacted Clerk Goergen to request clarification as to why he was prevented from returning Mrs.

⁶ City of Greenfield, Wisconsin, *Voter Registration and Absentee Voting*, available at https://web.archive.org/web/20220706130810/https://www.ci.greenfield.wi.us/677/Voter-Registration-and-Absentee-Voting.

⁷ The Clerk's office and the polling place are not directly connected by a bus route, which could pose additional hurdles for redirected absentee voters relying on public transportation and facing a time limit for delivering their ballot. See Milwaukee County Transit System, 55 Layton Avenue Bus Route, available at https://platform.remix.com/project/3087f49c/line/4d5d45cd?dir=0&latlng=42.95477,-88.03095,13.

Peters' ballot at the polling place and needed to make an additional trip to the City Clerk's office to return the ballot. A true and correct copy of this communication is attached as Exhibit 3.

27. Clerk Goergen responded: "Absentee ballots via third party drop off prearranged due to a disability are required to be dropped off in the clerk's office. Thus, our election workers were instructed to inform voters to return absentee ballots to the Clerk's office and upon receipt our office delivered them to the polls." (Exh. 2, Email from Jennifer Goergen dated August 16, 2022.)

COUNT I

VIOLATION OF WIS. STAT. § 6.87(6).

28. All preceding paragraphs are incorporated by reference.

A. The plain language and context of Wis. Stat. § 6.87(6) permit voters to return their ballots to polling locations.

- 29. Part of Wisconsin's statutory scheme for handling absentee ballots, except in municipalities which use a central count procedure, is that they are processed and counted at the polling place for the voter's ward or election district. See Wis. Sat. § 6.88(2), (3)(a).
- 30. For that reason, the statutes require that: "The ballot shall be returned so it is delivered to the polling place no later than 8 p.m. on election day." Wis. Stat. § 6.87(6).
- 31. The first sentence of Wis. Stat. § 6.87(6) does not specify *who* must return the ballot, and the language of the statute gives no reason to believe that it cannot be the absentee voter or their designated ballot return assistant.

- 32. No other provision or decision requires *only* the City Clerk or her staff to deliver absentee ballots to the polling place on Election Day for the ballots to be counted.
- 33. In other election statutes, the Legislature specifically stated when the municipal clerk alone must take a certain step in the absentee ballot counting process. See Wis. Stat. §§ 6.15(4)(a) ("Clerks holding new resident ballots shall deliver them to the election inspectors in the proper ward or election district where the new residents reside ..."), 6.88(1–2) ("the clerk shall enclose [an absentee ballot], unopened, in a carrier envelope which shall be securely sealed and endorsed with the name and official title of the clerk").
- 34. Wis. Stat. § 6.87(6), in contrast, does not use the words "the municipal clerk" or any other indication that the Legislature believed only clerks could deliver absentee ballots to the polling location, instead of absentee voters or their designated ballot return assistants. In other words, the statute only emphasizes *where* the ballot must go—"the polling place serving the elector's residence"—and *when*—"before 8 p.m." Wis. Stat. § 6.87(6).
- 35. Wis. Stat. § 6.86(3)(a), which deals with hospitalized voters, clarifies that ballots may be returned directly to polling places by someone other than the municipal clerk. The statute explicitly states that the elector's agent will return a completed ballot directly to the polling place if they return the ballot on Election Day. Wis. Stat. § 6.86(3)(c) ("if the ballot is returned on the day of the election, the agent

shall make personal delivery to the polling place serving the hospitalized voter's residence before the closing hours").

36. While this procedure is specific to hospitalized voters, it clarifies that the statutes generally permit someone other than the municipal clerk to deliver absentee ballots to the polling place. Wis. Stat. § 6.86(3)(c).

B. The Court's decision in Teigen does not prevent voters from returning their absentee ballots to polling places.

- 37. Nothing in *Teigen* explicitly addresses absentee voters' or designated ballot return assistants' ability to deliver their ballots to polling places on Election Day. 2022 WI 64, ¶¶86–87 (lead op., Bradley, R.G., J., with Ziegler, C.J. and Roggensack, J.).
- 38. To the contrary, in *Teigen*, the Court agreed that voters may return their ballots early to locations staffed by the municipal clerk—either their office, or an alternate site designated pursuant to Wis. Stat. § 6.855, which includes polling places. 2022 WI 64, ¶¶61–62; Wis. Stat. § 5.25(2).
- 39. When an absentee voter or her designated ballot return assistant returns an absentee ballot to the polling place, the ballot is returned to employees of the municipal clerk at a properly designated location, which complies with Wis. Stats. §§ 6.87(4)(b)1 and 6.87(6) and is supported by *Teigen*.

- C. An interpretation of Wis. Stat. § 6.87(6) that does not allow voters to return their absentee ballots to polling locations on Election Day would violate federal law.
- 40. Polling places are statutorily required to accommodate voters with disabilities. Wis. Stat. § 5.25(4)(a) ("Each polling place shall be accessible to all individuals with disabilities"); See, e.g., Wis. Stats. §§ 5.36–7, 5.40(5).
- 41. As such, polling places must accommodate a voter whose disability requires them to vote via absentee ballot and deliver the ballot on Election Day—including by providing curbside options by which an assistant may drop off a ballot—whereas the City Clerk's office may not be as accessible to the voter (or their assistant) on Election Day.
- 42. Moreover, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) mandates that municipalities must treat all disabled persons equitably and places affirmative obligations upon municipalities to ensure that voters with disabilities enjoy the franchise in all aspects of voting. 42 U.S.C. §§ 12131-12134; 28 C.F.R. §§ 35.101–35.190. Under the ADA, municipalities may not restrict the rights of voters who must vote absentee due to disability just because others may be able to vote in person. *Id*.
- 43. An interpretation of Wis. Stat. 6.87(6) in which absentee ballots cannot be returned on Election Day to polling places—which are required by Wisconsin statute to accommodate voters with disabilities—and must only be delivered to Clerk's offices that may not be accessible, would run afoul of federal requirements that voters with disabilities have equal access to voting as voters without disabilities. 42 U.S.C. §§ 12131–12134; 28 C.F.R. §§ 35.101–35.190.

- 44. In addition, limiting the ability of absentee voters with disabilities and designated ballot return assistants to return their ballots to any time before the statutory deadline of 8 P.M. clearly contradicts the federal mandate that disabled persons enjoy equal access to voting. 42 U.S.C. §§ 12131–12134; 28 C.F.R. §§ 35.101–35.190. Policies like those imposed by Clerk Goergen necessarily have earlier deadlines by which absentee ballots must be returned to their office so that the office can then deliver the ballots to the polls before they close. This effectively shortens the time by which certain voters, including voters who rely on ballot return assistance, can vote, contrary to Wisconsin and federal law.
- 45. Because Clerks' offices may not be accessible to disabled voters and may limit the time that an absentee ballot may be delivered to their office to before 8 P.M. on Election Day, an interpretation of Wis. Stat. § 6.87(6) in which absentee ballots cannot be returned on Election Day to polling places and may only be returned to clerks' offices would be federally preempted.
- 46. Statutory interpretation in Wisconsin begins with "a presumption against preemption." *Aurora Med. Grp. v. Dep't of Workforce Dev., Equal Rts. Div.*, 2000 WI 70, ¶13, 236 Wis. 2d 1, 612 N.W.2d 646; *see also Time Warner Cable v. Doyle*, 66 F.3d 867, 884 (7th Cir. 1995) (discussing, in the context of *Pullman* abstention, the importance of interpreting state statutes in a way that avoids unnecessary constitutional issues).

- 47. Presuming that Wis. Stat. § 6.87(6) is not federally preempted, it must be interpreted so that absentee voters and designated ballot return assistants can return their ballots to polling places on Election Day until the deadline of 8 P.M.
 - D. Municipal clerks may not alter Wis Stat. § 6.87(6) by preventing voters from delivering ballots to polling places on Election Day, or by altering the statutory deadline of 8 P.M. to return ballots.
- 48. All provisions of Wis Stat. § 6.87(6) must be construed as mandatory. Wis. Stat. § 6.84(2). As such, neither the municipal clerks, WEC, or any other entity has the discretion to mandate that the City Clerk herself must deliver an absentee ballot to the polling place under Wis Stat. § 6.87(6), rather than the absentee voter or their designated ballot return assistant. This interpretation effectively adds the term "the municipal clerk" to the language of Wis. Stat. § 6.87(6).
- 49. Neither the municipal clerks, WEC, or any other entity has the discretion to alter the 8 P.M. ballot return deadline in Wis. Stat. § 6.87(6). Wis. Stat. § 6.84(2).
- 50. By preventing absentee voters or their designated ballot return assistants like Mr. Peters from returning absentee ballots to their polling places themselves, and by imposing a deadline of 7 P.M. to return absentee ballots to the Clerk's office, Clerk Goergen violated Wis. Stat. § 6.87(6), which allows absentee voters and designated ballot return assistants to deliver absentee ballots to polling places until 8 P.M.

WHEREFORE, Complainant requests relief pursuant to Wis. Stat. § 5.06 as

follows:

A. Issue an order requiring Clerk Goergen and any other election official in

the City of Greenfield to accept lawful absentee ballots at the absentee

voter's appropriate polling place on Election Day until the statutory

deadline of 8 P.M. under Wis. Stat. §6.87(6), whether the ballot is

brought by an absentee voter themselves, by a designated ballot return

assistant, or by any other lawful means.

B. Issue an order requiring Clerk Goergen to update and correct any

policies or procedures for the City of Greenfield to reflect that an

absentee voter or their designated ballot return assistant may deliver

their ballots to the appropriate polling place on Election Day before 8

P.M. under Wis. Stat. §6.87(6).

C. Take any other action that has the effect of restraining Clerk Goergen

from acting contrary to law as described in this Complaint.

Dated this 16th day of August, 2023.

Electronically Signed By: <u>/s/ Daniel S. Lenz</u>

Daniel S. Lenz, SBN 1082058

LAW FORWARD

222 West Washington Avenue, Suite 250

Madison, WI 53703-0326

dlenz@lawforward.org

608-556-9120

Attorney for Brian Peters

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EXHIBIT 1

Subject: Absentee Ballot drop off

Date: Wednesday, August 3, 2022 at 2:13:45 PM Central Daylight Time

From: Jennifer Peters **To:** z GF Clerk Dept

Dear Election Official,

I am hereby requesting a reasonable accommodation under the Americans with Disabilities Act Title II which requires reasonable accommodation in voting procedures, the Voting Rights Act which provides for assistance to voters with disabilities, and Wisconsin Statute 7.15(14) which states that: "Each municipal clerk shall make reasonable efforts to comply with requests for voting accommodations made by individuals with disabilities whenever feasible."

Due to limitations experienced because of my disability, I am unable to deliver my ballot in person. I am requesting that my husband (and absentee ballot witness) Brian Peters, be allowed to turn in my ballot on my behalf.

Sincerely,
Jennifer Peters
5050 S 41st Street
Greenfield WI 53221

EXHIBIT 2

From: Jennifer Goergen < Jennifer. Goergen@greenfieldwi.us >

Sent: Tuesday, August 16, 2022 12:54 PM

To: Brian Peters < <u>BPeters@independencefirst.org</u>>

Cc: B Sajdak <bri>GreenfieldWI.US>; z

GF Clerk Dept < Clerk Dept@greenfieldwi.us>

Subject: RE: Election Day Issues

Dear Brian:

Thank you for your email. Our City Attorney advised my office on August 5, 2022 that based upon the language of the Tiegen decision, and a strict reading of the statute, that an absentee ballot may only be returned by mail or personally delivered to the municipal clerk at the clerk's office--that there are no other options provided in the statutes, unless the ballot was for a hospitalized voter. Absentee ballots via third party drop off prearranged due to a disability also are required to be dropped off in the clerk's office. Thus, our election workers were instructed to inform voters to return absentee ballots to the Clerk's office and upon receipt our office delivered them to the polls.

With regard to curbside voting, one stall was marked at each location "for curbside voting call 329-5219." In addition there was a sign posted at each polling place entrance with regard to the ability to vote curbside, which included voters experiencing Covid symptoms.

We did receive your wife Jennifer's request prearranging for you, Brian Peters, to drop off her absentee ballot. Our records indicate her absentee ballot was accepted (documented on our log at 10:43 a.m.), and delivered to the polls and counted.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Goergen, WCMC/CMC City Clerk City of Greenfield 7325 W. Forest Home Ave., Room 102 Greenfield, WI 53220 Telephone: (414) 329-5215

Fax: (414) 543-0591

EXHIBIT 3

From: Brian Peters [mailto:BPeters@independencefirst.org]

Sent: Monday, August 15, 2022 4:39 PM

To: z GF Clerk Dept < ClerkDept@greenfieldwi.us >

Subject: Election Day Issues

HI;

n Election Day, I attempted to deliver my wife's ballot (per reasonable accommodation request) to the polling site on Edgerton (Adoration Church). I was told I could not deliver it there, that I had to go to City Hall. This surprised me because it was contrary to the information I found on the WEC website. The staff person at the Clerk office told me it was due to a recent change in state law. Today, I attended a meeting for the Disability Vote Coalition where we were working on updating some information, and I mentioned that I was told I couldn't drop it off at the polling site anymore.

I was told the following information:

You can return an absentee ballot to your polling place. The statute is: "6.87(6) The ballot shall be returned so it is delivered to the polling place no later than 8 p.m. on election day. Except in municipalities where absentee ballots are canvassed under s. 7.52, if the municipal clerk receives an absentee ballot on election day, the clerk shall secure the ballot and cause the ballot to be delivered to the polling place serving the elector's residence before 8 p.m. Any ballot not mailed or delivered as provided in this subsection may not be counted."

Additionally, I don't recall seeing any signage for curbside voting at the church polling site.

Please let me know why I was told to go to City Hall, and why there apparently was no provision for curbside voting.

Thank you,

Brian Peters (He/His) • Independent Living Services Assistant Program Director Independence First • 540 S 1st Street • Milwaukee, Wisconsin • 53204 Direct 414-937-5912 • Office 414-291-7520 TTY/Relay • Fax 414-226-8155 BPeters@independencefirst.org • www.independencefirst.org



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