An Act providing for early voting by mail.

Whereas, The deferred operation of this act would tend to defeat its purpose, which is to provide forthwith for early voting by mail, therefore it is hereby declared to be an emergency law, necessary for the immediate preservation of the public safety, health and convenience.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives in General Court assembled, and by the authority of the same, as follows:

(a) For any annual or special municipal or state primary or election held on or before March 31, 2021, any person taking precautions related to COVID-19 in response to a declared state of emergency or guidance from a medical professional, local or state health official or any civil authority shall be deemed to be unable to cast their vote in person at a polling location by reason of physical disability.

(b) Notwithstanding any general or special law to the contrary, subsection (c) of section 91B of chapter 54 of the General Laws shall apply to voters who have been instructed by a medical professional or a local or state health official to self-quarantine in their home beginning
after noon on the seventh day before any annual or special municipal or state primary or election held on or before March 31, 2021 and such voters may designate their home address for delivery of the ballot.

(c) Notwithstanding section 25B of said chapter 54 or any other general or special law to the contrary, any eligible voter may vote early by mail or as prescribed herein for any annual or special municipal or state primary or election held on or before March 31, 2021.

(d) Any qualified voter wanting to early vote by mail may file with their local election official an application for an early voting ballot. Any form of written communication evidencing a desire to have an early voting ballot be sent for use for voting at an election shall be given the same effect as an application made in the form prescribed by the state secretary. Local election officials shall send early voting by mail ballots to those who have applied as soon as ballots are available. No application shall be deemed to be seasonably filed unless it is received in the office of the local election official before 5 P.M. on the fourth business day before the date on which the election is held.

(e) Local election officials may substitute absentee ballots for early voting ballots for those voters requesting to vote early by mail in municipal elections. An early voting ballot or absentee ballot substituted for an early voting ballot, along with an envelope bearing an affidavit as set forth in said section 25B of said chapter 54, shall be provided to each qualified voter who participates in early voting by mail.

(f) The local election officials shall cause to be placed on the voting lists opposite the name of a qualified voter who participates in early voting the letters “EV” designating an early voter.
(g) The counting of early voting ballots shall be consistent with said section 25B of said chapter 54 and related regulations to the extent practicable. All envelopes referred to in this act shall be retained with the ballots cast at the election and shall be preserved and destroyed in the manner provided by law for the retention, preservation or destruction of official ballots.

(h)(1) A voter in receipt of an early voting ballot for any election pursuant to this act may complete and return the ballot by: (i) delivering it in person to the office of the appropriate city or town clerk; (ii) dropping it in a secured municipal drop box; or (iii) mailing it to the appropriate city or town clerk.

(2) All early voting ballots submitted by mail, delivered in person to the office of the city or town clerk or returned to a secured municipal drop box as provided by this act shall be received by the city or town clerk before the hour fixed for closing the polls on the day of the election.

(i) Notwithstanding section 24 of said chapter 54 or any other general or special law to the contrary, the select board, board of selectmen, town council or city council may, by recorded and public vote, change any polling place to be used at the election not less than 20 days prior to the date of the election if it is determined that the public convenience or public health would be better served. If the select board, board of selectmen or town council determines that the public convenience or public health would be better served, they may house all polling places in a single building within the municipality if such building is suitably equipped; provided, however, that alcoholic beverages shall not be served or consumed in that portion of a building used as a polling place, during voting hours or while ballots are being counted therein. In cities, the city council may designate polling places in non-adjacent precincts if they determine the public
convenience or public health would be better served. In making a decision to change a polling place, the select board, board of selectmen, town council or city council shall evaluate and report on whether such change would have a disparate, adverse impact on access to the polls on the basis of race, national origin, disability, income or age and, not later than 3 days prior to changing a polling place, shall make publicly available on its website and at the office of the town or city clerk a report on its evaluation. When the polling places have been designated pursuant to this act, the board of registrars shall post on the municipal website and at other such places as it may determine, a description of the polling places and shall notify voters by using an electronic means, to the extent available, such as via email or reverse 911 call.

(j) Notwithstanding section 29 of chapter 53 of the General Laws, sections 11, 11B, 12 and 13 of said chapter 54 or any other general or special law to the contrary, if the city or town clerk determines in writing that there is a deficiency in the number of required election officers, then the appointing authority may appoint election officers without regard to political party membership, voter status, residence in the city or town or inclusion on a list filed by a political party committee pursuant to said sections 11B and 12 of said chapter 54. If the position of the warden, clerk or inspector or the deputy of any such officer, if any, is vacant within the 3 weeks preceding the election, the city or town clerk may fill the vacancy by appointing a competent person willing to serve, without regard to political party membership, voter status, residence in the city or town or inclusion on a list filed by a political party committee pursuant to said sections 11B and 12 of said chapter 54.

(k) Notwithstanding sections 67 and 83 of said chapter 54 or any other general or special law to the contrary, the city or town clerk may eliminate the requirement that a voter provide
their name or residence to an election officer at the ballot box and that the election officer mark
the name off a voting list before the voter may deposit the ballot in the ballot box.