Chairman Thompson, Vice Chair Torres, Ranking Member Katko, and members of the U.S. House of Representatives Homeland Security Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony today on the security of our elections system.

Let me set the scene for you.

May 4, 2021. It's primary election day in Ohio, and someone has been granted access into a government office in the Lake County administration building. That individual has plugged an unauthorized laptop into a government network in an effort to capture election data. Presumably, their hope is to discover and download some type of election information to prove election results can be impacted by outside influence.

That person failed, and failed miserably.

Why? Preparation.

When I served as a Green Beret in the U.S. Army Special Forces, we never let our guard down. Our lives were a constant churn of study, preparation, and execution. After all, the bad guys only had to be right once – we had to be right every single time.

When I was elected Secretary of State, I took that same mindset and adapted it to how we operate in Ohio. We made it the standard.

So how did we stop this perpetrator on primary election day in 2021? It actually started back in 2019 when we issued our first Security Directive for Ohio's 88 county boards of elections. It was a 34-point checklist of physical and cybersecurity requirements designed with one purpose – keep out the bad guys.

I'll be honest – when I announced these requirements at a meeting of our county board of election teams, there was an audible groan – with even some laughter. We were asking a lot of them – it's true. But our elections are too important. We can't sit back on our hands and hope everything is going to be ok. We have to take action.

And that's what our county boards of elections did. From the largest, most populous and sophisticated county boards to the most rural counties that had been administering elections their way for generations, they rolled up their sleeves, and in concert with the security professionals in my office, they got it done. Make no mistake, this was a big lift.

But that's why Ohio's bipartisan teams of election professionals are the best in the business.

So when this individual plugged in their laptop at the Lake County Administrative Building, what did they find? Nothing.

First, every single county board of elections computer system had long been siloed off from all other county offices. Right then and there, anyone thinking they can use the county computer system to infiltrate the board of elections would find they had hit a hard brick wall.

Second, even if they had somehow plugged this computer into the county board of elections system, it would be immediately blocked because it would be recognized as an unauthorized computer. Again, game over.

These are just two of dozens of improvements made at our county boards of elections since 2019. Naturally, when we talk about cybersecurity, we're talking primarily about those elements of election infrastructure which are connected to the internet – email, websites, polling location lookups, and online voter registration. What this perpetrator may not have realized is that there is a completely separate element of election infrastructure which is never connected to the internet, not even capable of an internet connection, and which is rigorously tested before every election and audited after every election.

Anything that touches a ballot – scanners, voting machines, and tabulators – are 100% air gapped. Simply put, the Lake County attempted breach never had a chance of succeeding because of the forward-thinking cybersecurity protocols we developed in 2019, and the county boards of elections that worked so hard to implement them.

Since our first directive, we've issued two more, with the most recent announced just last month. As the tactics of our enemies change and evolve, we must do the same. That's why we can't and won't rest on our laurels. A comprehensive, multi-faceted security strategy within our county boards of elections is necessary to provide the redundancy required of a strong election system infrastructure.

We also know that our elections are only as successful as the people who run them. In 2020, we recruited a small army of dedicated patriots to serve as poll workers. In the face of uncertainty amid the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, a record 56,789 Ohioans were trained and ready to serve their communities and provide the secure, accurate, and accessible election to which our voters have become accustomed.

In light of the pandemic, we knew we had to get creative about poll worker recruitment. So that's exactly what we did. We worked with lawyers, accountants, and realtors to provide continuing education credit in exchange for serving on election day.

We went into barbershops and salons with our Styling for Democracy recruitment project.

We reached out to veterans who heard a Second Call to Duty and signed them up to defend the constitution once again, but this time as poll workers.

We even went into the high schools to recruit high school seniors to boost their civic education, and hopefully get some extra credit on the side.

It worked. We set records and fully staffed every polling location. But we did something more -- we created a legion of ambassadors – an army of truth-tellers who can speak firsthand about the lengths Ohio goes to ensure the integrity of our elections. You can't put a price on that.

Integrity matters. It's what our elections are built upon. As Thomas Jefferson put it, our government derives its "just powers from the consent of the governed". We can't maintain that consent if we aren't always moving forward and finding ways to balance election security and accessibility.

Whether it's the post-election audits we require after every election, staffing our county boards of elections with a balanced team of bipartisan election officials working collaboratively and professionally, or new security upgrades that protect our systems from those who would do it harm – we have a duty to maintain. It's an oath I swore to protect, and it's a model I hope we can share with the nation.

Yours in service,

Frank LaRose
Ohio Secretary of State