

TO: Senator Slossberg and Representative Spallone

SUBJECT: Bill 5012: An Act Implementing Early Voting in Connecticut

The purpose of this communication is not to comment on whether early voting should be allowed (although my personal opinion is that it should be) but rather to comment on a key administrative issue that would arise if it were allowed—the lack of proper training for the Centralized Absentee Ballot function. This issue already exists and would multiply in its implications should early voting become law. The solution is relatively cheap, and the consequences of not implementing the solution potentially huge.

Let me first introduce myself as a just-retired Deputy Registrar of Voters in Fairfield, having been in that position for approximately five years. My wife, Margaret-Joyce, also has been involved in the past several elections in Fairfield, first as an Absentee Ballot Counter, and then for the past two elections as Absentee Ballot Counting Moderator. The following remarks are based on our joint experience “on the front lines” of processing absentee ballots.

I would much have preferred to testify in person on this subject, so that I could answer any questions. This was not possible this time due to schedule conflicts. However, I would welcome the chance to do this at another time, if it would be useful.

My comments will concentrate on the lack of proper training for Moderators. The issue of training for the workers can easily be implied.

The potential scope of the issue can be illustrated as follows. There are no good statistics on how many of Connecticut's 169 municipalities count absentee ballots in a centralized location (the option is to do them at the individual polling places). However, one source in the Secretary of State's office estimates that the number is about 30 municipalities.

Thirty out of 169 does not sound like much, but if one assumes they are the largest 30 municipalities, a likely assumption, then these towns account for 48% of all Connecticut active registered voters, based on published SOTS statistics, current as of October, 2008.

I do not have access to what extent absentee ballot voting is used state-wide—this should be available from SOTS—but as an example 11% of all of Fairfield votes in the past election were cast via absentee ballot of some type.

This number could easily double or triple under a “no fault” form of absentee ballot counting. The implication regarding training is not only that existing centralized facilities will be handling more votes, but that more municipalities will likely go to centralized counting.

Here is the problem description: The State requires Absentee Ballot Counting Moderators to be certified by attending training which provides them with the information to do their job. However, at present, these Moderators are trained, and receive their certification, in the same classes as Polling Place Moderators. I am told by the individual from ROVAC who conducts these classes, Judi Beaudreau, that only about 30 minutes of the entire class is devoted to absentee ballot processing, with the rest focused on polling place issues—proper enough if you are a polling place moderator but not very helpful if you are focused in absentee ballots.

Absentee Ballot Counting Moderators, who quite often only perform this function once a year or even once every two years, must perform duties quite different than polling place Moderators e.g. processing Presidential and Overseas ballots, and must provide reporting in ways mandated by State law which are quite different than required of polling place moderators. Little or none of this is touched on in these 30 minutes!

To fill this training at present, local Registrars of Voters “try hard” to fill in training gaps, but few are adequately familiar with the unique details of centralized absentee ballot counting to be totally effective here.

The fallback then becomes the State manual on this subject which, ignoring some factual errors in the present version, is totally inadequate in its presentation method to effectively communicate to Moderators who as already stated only do this function every year or two. They need and deserve a much more easily understood document—one aimed at people who often have little background in their task, but must get it done well.

I have already communicated my concerns about the manual to SOTS and have copied in Rep. Drew’s office regarding all communications between myself and SOTS on this subject, so I will not repeat them here.

A solution to all the above would seem to be represented by legislative support for SB 917 AAC, The Training of Registrars of Voters, a bill being supported by the League of Women Voters of Connecticut, of which I am a member. Part of that legislation asks for “creation of an elections and compliance training unit within the Secretary of the State’s office to bring much needed consistency and uniform compliance to our election processes...Such unit shall assure compliance with all applicable federal and state statutes and regulations by any person holding the office or designation of registrar of voters, deputy registrar of voters, permanent assistant registrar of voters or poll worker, as applicable.

This should cover the need, if correctly enforced, to adequately provide training for the Absentee Ballot counting process, including Moderator training.

Even without benefit this legislation, however, SOTS should right now better comply with the need to effectively train Absentee Ballot Counting Moderators by creating a separate training program, including a dedicated Moderator's class, and supporting it with a better reference manual.

Thank you for the opportunity to bring this issue before you. As stated before, I would welcome the opportunity to appear in person, along with my wife, to provide more detail.

Thomas F. Flynn

