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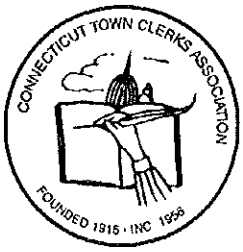

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2011 Legislative Committee

Testimony of
Essie Labrot, Town Clerk of West Hartford & Vice Chair of CTCA's Legislative Committee
Government Administration and Elections Committee
Monday February 14, 2011

Good morning Senator Slossberg, Representative Morin and the distinguished members of the GAE Committee, my name is Essie Labrot, and I am testifying on behalf of the Connecticut Town Clerks Association (CTCA). I am the legislative vice-chair of the Town Clerk's Association and the Town Clerk of West Hartford. I am here today to testify in opposition to **Senate Bill 94** – An Act Implementing No-Excuse Absentee Voting, **Senate Joint Resolution 25** – Amending the State Constitution to Allow for No-Excuse Absentee Voting and **House Joint Resolution 88** – Amending the State Constitution to Grant Authority to the General Assembly Regarding Election Administration.

Our Association has done extensive research on the issues around No Excuse Absentee Ballot as well as Early Voting options. It is important to note that these two options be distinguished from one another. Each provides the voter with the opportunity to vote prior to a single Election Day but they have very different processes, methods and costs associated with implementation.

Research from other states has shown that with Absentee Ballot voting (or Vote by Mail as some States refer to it) the volume has doubled or tripled. However, many States have found that Absentee Ballot voting has not increased voter turnout, rather voters who would normally go to the Polls have preferred to vote by mail. There is no documentation that we could find that consistently shows voter turnout has increased significantly due to implementation of a No Excuse Absentee Balloting system.

Our current system for processing Absentee Ballots could not handle the increase in volume under a No Excuse system. The No Excuse option would quickly strain an outdated, inefficient and manual process for mailing, accounting for and counting of Absentee Ballots. For example, in my town of West Hartford, we processed 2,000 Absentee Ballots for the State election, and almost 5,000 for the last Presidential. If that number is doubled or tripled, we would need to hire temporary workers for the thirty days prior to the Election since statutorily, we must mail out the ballots within 24-hours of receipt of the application. The No Excuse option for voting will have a significant impact on our municipal budgets as an unfunded mandate.

Our Association is concerned about the potential for fraud in this highly manual process when the volume increases by two or three hundred percent. The current system does not provide for the security and storage of large number of ballots within the vault at many town halls. Also at higher volumes, there is greater opportunity for errors. It would be increasingly difficult to properly ensure the ballots are being voted by the applicant. Town Clerks agree with the State Elections Enforcement Commission that the potential for abuse is greater under an Absentee Ballot system than under an Early Voting Polling site where an individual would need to produce identification before being presented with a ballot.

We are concerned that many voters under an Absentee Ballot system may be disenfranchised. With Absentee Ballot voting, many more votes are not counted due to envelopes having no signature, not received in time or being mismarked. The State of Missouri had to discount 8,000 Absentee Ballots in 2008 for these reasons. Those 8,000 ballots could have changed the outcome of the election. At an Early Voting Polling site these voters would have been given another chance to vote their ballots correctly and not be disenfranchised.

No Excuse Absentee Ballots would also change the election season for candidates allowing residents to vote up to 30 days prior to Election Day, causing campaigns to start much earlier. Voters could be casting votes before they have all the information necessary to make an informed decision. Voters may wish to change their vote based on this new information.

States that have chosen to use No Excuse Absentee Ballots typically have County forms of government and have centralized Voting Centers where the process is administered by Election Officials whose sole purpose is to run the Election. In States such as Colorado and Florida, voters must travel sometimes many miles to vote and the No Excuse has provided a convenience factor for them. In West Hartford, we have a polling place every mile and Connecticut has hundreds of polling places statewide.

In conclusion, while the Town Clerks Association does not support the concept of No Excuse Absentee Balloting, we recognize the interest and need to offer voting alternatives that can address turnout, while keeping the integrity of the process as well as cost consideration in these difficult budget times. A total review of the process including technology and staffing would be required before a plan is put into action. The Town Clerks would welcome to be part of this discussion and help come up with some solutions that will benefit all our constituents.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify. I would be pleased to take any questions that you may have at this time.

Respectfully submitted,

Essie Labrot
Vice Chair, Legislative & Elections Committee, CT Town Clerks Association
Town/Council Clerk, West Hartford