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GAE Public Hearing

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**Testimony of Gabriela De Golia regarding the Governor's Bill No. 5022
An Act Increasing Penalties for Voter Intimidation and Interference**

Mr. Chair and members of the committee,

My name is Gabriela De Golia, and I am currently a junior at Wesleyan University in Middletown, CT. In the spring of 2011, I registered to vote in Middletown, and have been proudly declaring the city as my “home” ever since. This past fall, I became heavily involved in the town’s local politics, and made it a point to register other interested students to vote so that they could participate in Middletown’s elections. As a result of my experiences (and those of many other registered student voters) from last fall that are explained below, I wish to express my strong support of the Governor’s Bill No. 5022 to increase the penalties for voter intimidation, suppression and interference.

Last fall, a group of students and I were able to register over 500 students to vote in Middletown’s November 2011 elections. Despite my happiness at getting so many college students interested in local politics, this endeavor turned out to be one of the most stressful undertakings of my life. This was due in large part to numerous misleading statements geared towards Wesleyan student voters made by various Middletown city officials and candidates for office in response to our successful voter registration efforts.

From early September to Election Day, Wesleyan students received misleading information regarding their ability to vote in Middletown. A current Middletown police officer, Tom Sebold, posted troubling comments on various news outlets, including responses to an article I had authored. Officer Sebold falsely stated that there would be adverse legal and/or financial consequences for Wesleyan students who registered to vote in Middletown. Molly Salafia, a candidate for the Middletown Planning & Zoning Commission, made similar statements.

Furthermore, in late October, I heard that hundreds of the new student registrations might be rejected due to a last-minute change in the Registrar’s decades-old policy of using campus PO Boxes as the appropriate address for Wesleyan student registrations. After having worked so hard to register students in good faith and in accordance with historic practices, I could not help but wonder why this was happening at the 11th hour before the elections.

As a result of the above-mentioned information and occurrences, I went to the Middletown Office of the Registrar of Voters on October 28th to get an accurate and complete understanding of the situation. The Office's personnel failed to clearly state information that is fundamental to their mission. They were unable to adequately educate me on many of the concerns I brought up, such as Tom Sebold's intimidating comments, and whether or not students would be notified in a timely manner about their potential change in polling location. They said that the legal and financial consequences Officer Sebold had insinuated were possible, and that I should talk to Wesleyan's Office of Student Affairs for more details.

I could not understand why Wesleyan personnel would be in a better position than the Registrars of Voters to provide accurate and timely information to me on issues regarding voter registration and voting rights. Their claim of ignorance seemed willfully misleading. Because of their statements, I left their office thinking I had unintentionally allowed Wesleyan students to register to vote in an illegal fashion, and that I (along with the 500+ new registrants) might therefore be subject to legal ramifications. As a result, I considered the idea of contacting all newly registered students to suggest to them that they revoke their registrations so as to avoid potential legal or financial consequences.

After doing a small amount of research, it became clear that the Registrar personnel and Tom Sebold were wrong, and that students would not be subject to such consequences. It also became clear that, less than a week before the election, registered students had still not received any information from city officials regarding the fact that they may now be voting in one of four possible polling locations.

On November 2nd, then-Mayor Sebastian Giuliano visited our Student Center. He told students that if they failed to appear in person at the Office of the Registrar of Voters before noon on November 4th, they would risk "[coming] up empty" if they attempted to vote on Election Day. He cited as proof of his inaccurate statements a misleading letter from the Registrar of Voters. The letter requested that students appear in person at that Registrar's Office to confirm their identities and re-register at their physical addresses. Registered students only received the letter 24 hours before aforementioned deadline; this ultimately misled many of them into thinking they would not be able to vote in an election that was days away.

I received numerous phone calls and emails from friends who were worried that they shouldn't vote or wouldn't be able to vote as a result of the foregoing and other intimidating and misleading information. Local officials had no credibility on the subject, so I had to explain to these students that they did not need to go to the Registrar in order to remain eligible to vote. As a result of these students' concerns and the inability of Middletown officials to provide in a timely way clear information regarding voting eligibility and polling locations, I requested that the Office of the Secretary of the State immediately clarify the misleading information that had been given to students by the Registrar and the Mayor.

Thankfully, many students voted on Election Day. However, many other registered students did not get out and vote in the November 2011 elections as a result of the above-mentioned occurrences. Just amongst my friends, many became discouraged by the process and decided that it was not "worth it" to figure out whether or where they could legally vote in Middletown.

My colleagues and I worked day in and day out all last semester to mitigate the damage caused by these occurrences. By Election Day, after having felt pressured by members of the Middletown community to discontinue our efforts, witnessing the near-rejection of about 250 voter registrations, dealing with the slicing of the Wesleyan campus into five different voting districts, and having organized transportation for all students to their respective polling locations, we were all physically and emotionally exhausted and very disappointed in the officials.

It has become clear that responsible officials were not focused on encouraging and enabling students to perform a basic civic duty last fall. This, to me, is deeply troubling. I hope that few other Connecticut students will ever be subject to such behavior and impediments again.

Because of the abuses the Wesleyan student community was subject to last fall, I strongly support the Governor's Bill No. 5022, and urge that it be passed.

Respectfully submitted,

Gabriela De Golia