DENISE MERRILL
SECRETARY OF THE STATE
CONNECTICUT

GAE Committee
Public Hearing Testimony
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Good Morning Chairman Morin, Chairman Slossberg and members of the committee. For the record my name is Denise Merrill and I am Secretary of the State of Connecticut. I would like to briefly address eight bills before the committee this morning.

- Raised Bill 212 **"AN ACT CONCERNING PROVISIONAL BALLOTS FOR STATE AND MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS"**

This bill would allow provisional ballots to be used in state and municipal elections, and I support this concept, which is our proposal. Currently, provisional ballots are available in federal elections for voters who are registered but for some reason their name is not on the registry list for their polling place or town. When you vote by provisional ballot you are only casting votes for federal candidates.

This bill will allow a provisional ballot to look like the regular ballot being used because it will include all the candidates running for office in that election. Because federal candidates only run in even number election year, the provisional ballots are not used during municipal elections. This bill would extend the use of provisional ballots to all elections for all offices including local candidates. This also gives us an opportunity to streamline the election process. By extending the use of Provisonal ballots, we can then eliminate the need to have challenge ballots. Provisional ballots allow voters whose registration is in doubt to cast ballots on Election Day.

Our office proposed this bill last year as well, and it did pass the House. Very simply, we have had the provisional ballot in use for a number of years and there have been no incidents of any kind on Election Day which would give us any security or integrity concern. Provisional ballots are counted later, up to six days after Election Day – only after it is determined that the voter is legitimately registered. If the registrars are unable to determine that the applicant is eligible to vote, then the ballot is not counted.

Provisional ballots are currently in use for federal elections; raised bill 212 would expand that to municipal and state elections. I support passage.

- Raised Bill 213 **"AN ACT CONCERNING INTERNET ACCESS FOR REGISTRARS OF VOTERS"**

In 2011, there are still registrars of voters in the state of Connecticut in some towns that do not have internet access in their offices. This is unacceptable and frankly will make their jobs unworkable in the coming years as many more of the tools they need to do their jobs will go online. All this bill says is that a town needs to provide internet access for the Registrars of Voters office.

That basic equipment should be considered essential just like electricity, phones, and heat. The need for internet access is distinguishable from access to the Centralized Voter Registration System (CVRS), which is mandatory for registrars to have, but is also a closed system.

I have been travelling the state since I was sworn in as Secretary and talking to town leaders about the need to integrate election planning into town planning, and the need to view elections as a key town government function rather than a once or twice a year burden. That starts with making sure Registrars have internet access. This enables them to communicate more effectively with our office and access information they need to do their jobs that is contained on our website.

For example, we are about to launch a web-based election night reporting system to replace the cumbersome system of faxing or even hand-delivering--by state trooper—returns to this office. Without internet access, registrars will not be able to participate in this exciting project. We intend to expand training programs for Registrars through webinars and online video.

Most towns have internet access for registrars of voters. So for them this is not an issue. But for the small number of towns lacking internet access for their Registrars of Voters, the time has come to modernize. So I support this bill and I urge passage.

- Raised Bill 214 **"AN ACT CONCERNING PERMANENT ABSENTEE BALLOT STATUS FOR THE PERMANENTLY DISABLED"**

This bill would make absentee ballot status permanent for the permanently physically disabled and clarify instructions for the recipient of such status. This bill corrects one aspect of a bill to address the issue of permanent absentee ballots that was acted upon by the General Assembly last year. In 2011, lawmakers enacted a bill that would provide continuous absentee ballot applications to those who qualify for permanent absentee ballot status, but this still presents a burden on the permanently physically disabled.

Raised Bill 214 would continuously supply the permanently physically disabled with an absentee ballot as opposed to an application which they would need to keep filling out. This makes a lot of sense and I would say it embodies the spirit of what we were trying to accomplish last year with the permanent absentee ballot bill.

I commend Rep. Nafis for her diligent work on this concept. I support this bill and I urge passage.

- Raised Bill 215 **"AN ACT CONCERNING SPECIAL ELECTION TIMING FOR PROBATE JUDGE VACANCIES"**

I will say that in general I support this concept. I will add that the bill as it is currently constructed needs to be reconciled with other state statutes that govern this area. We look forward to working with the members of this committee on a workable solution.

- Raised Bill 218 **"AN ACT CONCERNING POLLING PLACES FOR PRIMARIES"**

This bill would permit small towns (under 20,000 in population) to reduce the number of polling places for primaries. The cost of running elections is of particular concern for small towns. Many times you will have a much smaller voter turnout for a primary than for a general election. As such, a town may not need to staff and run as many polling places for a primary as they do at a general election. Reducing the number of polling places would definitely save towns money, and in general we support the idea of cutting the cost of elections.

Appropriately, this bill also addresses the important issue of how to notify voters of a change in polling location. However, eliminating certain polling places becomes problematic in cities where the neighborhood polling place is important because people can get there by foot. Eliminating a polling place in a city neighborhood can create voter confusion and place a hardship on a voter who does not have a car if he or she wants to exercise their right to vote.

There were also frankly some concerns about undue political influence in the big cities – where the primary is the major election – if certain primary precincts that are considered the base of one candidate are somehow eliminated. We have tried a compromise on this issue in the past, so what I would say about this bill is that if a compromise can be reached that addresses the needs of the small towns to lower their election costs while not creating problems for voters in the bigger cities, I will support such a compromise.

- Raised Bill 5250 **"AN ACT CONCERNING THE APPOINTMENT OF PRIMARY POLLING OFFICIALS"**

This bill would provide that an enrolled party member in the state, rather than just an enrolled party member in the municipality, may serve as a primary polling place official. Currently, any registered voter in the state can serve as a poll worker in a general election. This bill would make that rule applicable for a primary, where any enrolled party member in the state could serve as a poll worker for a primary of their party in any town in Connecticut.

I support this concept because any registrar of voters will tell you how difficult it is to find qualified poll workers for a primary. This bill would expand the pool of people available to work at the polls and that is a good thing. My feeling is that if voters from different towns can work the polls in other towns in Connecticut in a general election, the same rule should apply to enrolled party members in a primary. This bill simply conforms primaries to what is already done in general elections. So I support this bill and I urge passage.

Thank you very much and I would be happy to take your questions.