Appropriations Committee:

February 28, 2019

TESTIMONY OF SECRETARY OF THE STATE DENISE W. MERRILL:

Good morning Co-Chairs Osten and Walker, and Ranking Members Formica and Lavielle. For the record, my name is Denise Merrill and I am the Secretary of the State.

As all of you know, the Secretary of the State’s office hosts a number of departments, including elections administration, publications, and business services, some of which generate considerable revenue for the state. In Fiscal Year 2018, my office generated almost $31-million annually in fees and to date, in FY 2019, has generated almost $19-million, which goes into the General Fund. Our annual operating expenses total slightly less than $9 million—less than a third of the money we generate—and the office has become leaner in recent years, which was done without impacting service to the public. When I was elected Secretary of the State, there were 85 employees of this office; today there are 65. Modernizations we introduced over the last several years have helped this office keep up with demands despite having fewer people.

When I became president of the National Association of Secretaries of State in July 2016, cybersecurity was hardly mentioned at our annual convention; now, just about every workshop, panel, and keynote focuses on protecting our elections from electronic interference. In September 2017, we learned from the federal Department of Homeland Security (DHS) that Connecticut was one of the states that agents of the Russian government targeted with cyberscans of our public-facing online election infrastructure. Our perimeter security successfully turned this scan away. In laymen’s terms, the Russians rattled the doors and windows, but our locks and alarm systems held firm.

They aren’t done trying.

In classified briefings I have attended, the Department of Homeland Security has made it clear that foreign actors are still looking for ways to interfere with our elections. The election administration world has changed, and it has changed quickly. Connecticut must be prepared
for the new future of election security – cybersecurity. We must take the appropriate steps, right now, to ensure that our elections are safe from foreign interference.

I have sat where you sit today, and I know how difficult your task is.

When I sat before you last year, I sounded the warning bell. The Intelligence Community has been sounding the warning bell since the 2016 elections. Foreign actors, including foreign governments, are actively waging cyberwar against the United States.

They are trying to erode Americans’ trust in our elections, through information warfare and through hacking.

I am here to ask you for the resources that the Secretary of the State’s office needs to ensure that Connecticut’s elections remain among the best, most trustworthy, and protected elections in the United States, and the world. Cybersecurity is now a permanent feature of election administration, and we as a state must treat it as such.

I am asking you to appropriate the funds necessary to hire the specialized IT cybersecurity staff required to perform this critical function. In the realm of cybersecurity, only reacting to problems as they occur simply isn’t enough. We need to be proactive, and to do that this office requires resources, specifically funding for additional positions related to elections administration, with an emphasis on training, communications, and technical assistance.

The threat of interference is real, and I have been part of the national planning process to ensure that our elections remain free and fair. We are, and will always be, doing everything possible to protect the security of Connecticut elections – from training local officials to full assessments of our system to working with the federal government to develop best practices.

We are working with the federal government to get Cyber Hygiene scanning and reporting services and EI- and MS-ISAC monitoring and reporting on real-time traffic entering and leaving the State of Connecticut network through DHS. We also had DHS perform a full, on-site Risk and Vulnerability Assessment, and have coordinated with DHS’s northeast regional team, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Connecticut Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection, the State Election Enforcement Commission, and our state’s IT team on response preparation. We always work with federal and state law enforcement in preparing for elections, and in 2018 we were able to add DHS to our planning.

The federal Help America Act Funds we received this year will be a tremendous help, but they are temporary. We need the resources to make cybersecurity a permanent function of the election administration of this office, including training and coordinating with local governments, across state government, and with the federal government.

I am requesting the addition of an Election Officer with subject matter experience in cybersecurity and election technology to our elections team. This person will provide critical aid to local election officials with technology, cybersecurity, and the Central Voter Registration System.
Also, I am requesting the addition of an IT3 position with subject matter expertise in cybersecurity to our department’s information technology team. This person will focus on the cybersecurity defenses for the Secretary of the State’s office, liaise with DHS and the federal intelligence community on election cybersecurity, and work closely with the election team to protect the integrity of Connecticut’s elections.

Cyberattacks will be a permanent threat to our election administration for the foreseeable future. We have reached a critical juncture in the history of American elections. Hostile foreign powers that are attempting to interfere with our elections aren’t just trying to access our systems, they are trying to sow distrust of the very governmental institutions that make America the greatest democracy in the world – our free and fair elections. We must commit to both stop any attempted interference and to let every Connecticut resident know that we are doing everything we can do to successfully protect our elections.

Next year marks the 100th anniversary of women’s suffrage. This is a key milestone in our country’s long and crooked journey to universal suffrage, and we as a state should not let it go unremarked upon. I have been vocal about the importance of making sure that every voter can easily register to vote, and this centennial is the anniversary of a key step forward in voter registration and voting rights.

I have created the Centennial Commission for Women’s Suffrage to bring together advocates and public interest groups to mark this important anniversary. I am requesting funding to support these efforts, with printing and publications, and with events and staffing. We will be honoring the past, but also making an important statement about the importance of expanding the fundamental right to cast a ballot.

Thank you.