Senator Osten, Senator Formica, Representative Walker, and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee. I am Michael Brandi, the Executive Director and General Counsel for the State Elections Enforcement Commission. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony today concerning the Governor’s proposed budget.

We fully recognize that the State continues to face difficult financial decisions. Elections Enforcement has worked and will continue to work to pare down costs and create efficiencies to enable our staff to do more with less, while still performing our core governmental function at a high level.

One necessary element of maintaining our agency’s functionality is providing it with sufficient funding. Our operating budget is bare bones. In fact, for this current budget cycle, in order to not fall into a deficit, it has been necessary for us to use money from multiple unfilled positions to operate. The budget as it was passed last time gave us only around $25,000 per year to operate agency above personnel costs. This simply is not enough to cover the costs of Commission meetings and licenses that keep our electronic filing system going and computers working. Just how far short the figure falls is made clear by two simple facts: In 2018 we had thirty-three Commission meetings and each Commission meeting costs about $1,000. That’s more than our whole operating budget right there.

Our proposal this year was modest. For the first fiscal year, we asked for only $80,000 in additional monies over the $25,000 currently allotted to us for operations and, in the second, we asked for only $109,000 over such costs. This is the bare minimum needed to allow us to function with the positions allotted and keep our systems on-line. Despite General Statutes section 9-7c and the
protection it is supposed to provide the SEEC as a watchdog agency, namely the requirement that
the budget requested by SEEC shall be the appropriations recommended, section B of this
Governor’s budget provides for only $39,000 above the woefully inadequate $25,000 we now have
– less than half of what the agency needs for the first fiscal year and only about a third of what was
requested for operating costs over the current allotment.

While budgeted for 35 positions, as of today we are effectively staffed at 32. Our present staffing
level is due to two vacancies and one attorney who has been serving as chief steward of the A&R
union for the past four years. In the last two years, SEEC has lost and has been unable to refill an
elections officer and our front desk clerk due to inadequate funding for the agency.

Simply put, we need all of our vacant positions filled and the funding to do so.

As I mentioned, in addition to the personnel costs, we have asked for minimal funds for this year
and next year to operate the agency, including funds for the upkeep and improvement of our online
filing and disclosure system. Our technology—like all technology—requires continued maintenance
and upgrades. We work extremely hard at keeping the systems protected and safe, both by
improving our cyber security, and through cost-effective use of virtual servers in our operations.

As Governor Lamont has noted with respect to technology, it is incumbent upon our state to “lead
by investing in the first all-digital government, and reverse engineer every transaction from the
taxpayer’s shoes. . . The entry point to Connecticut will be through its digital front door.”

At SEEC we have been applying this strategy for years, from facilitating the online filing of
campaign finance reports, to our eCRIS system and its constant improvements, to the creation of an
in-house electronic workflow and ticket system that is integrated with a campaign tracking system,
tied to individual committees. The savings are not just within SEEC budget, but in streamlining how
citizens interact with our agency, and engage in the electoral process.

We offer campaign finance and eCRIS training to every new treasurer with personal outreach by
our staff, accommodating dates, times and locations requested by treasurers. Along with this, we
have moved away from mailed paper notices in favor of targeted email notices. Staff was able to save the agency significant funds while increasing the rate of reminders – offering not just pre-filing period reminders but mid-filing period reminders and, in some cases, end-of-filing period reminders as well. Based upon these outreach efforts, there has been a continual increase in the quality of information provided in the filings and the timeliness of the filings. Thanks to our outreach, eCRIS and mandatory e-filing legislation, 99% of all committees now file electronically. That means less cost to our agency and the State, less paper used, and, importantly, better disclosure: instant electronic access to campaign finance filings for the public and the press.

We are also looking for ways to use our technology and resources to offer savings to municipalities. We introduced legislation to create a pilot program to take on municipal filings electronically. We recognized that our system is scalable and robust and can be expanded or shared. The Municipal Pilot Program was completed and a report has been submitted to the GAE committee. We have offered to create savings for the state as a whole using a low cost action to reduce the potential harm of budget reductions to municipalities and off-setting them with increased services from SEEC, centralizing the process with automated systems capable of handling it. Taking on the role of filing repository for municipalities, would be cost-effective, increase transparency and provide a significant improvement in meaningful disclosure.

In our regular post-election (electronic) survey of candidates and treasurers, our eCRIS system always garners the most enthusiastic praise. This year we added a question about whether it would be helpful for us to assist campaigns in creating a uniform, online contribution interface for campaigns to use. The response was overwhelmingly positive – 95% of the treasurers want our help. For those who haven’t been involved in this process, minor mistakes on the part of the treasurer setting up the site can be painful for all involved with the committee, as well as quite time-consuming, as the agency ensures the qualifying contribution thresholds have been met and prevents fraud. Despite their challenges, it is clear: Online portals are inevitable and an ever-increasing manner of raising contributions. Credit card contributions are the present and the future. We have introduced legislation this session to allow us to assist treasurers with this process, making it easier for both treasurers and contributors alike.
However, in order for us continue what we have been doing and to expand our online and electronic initiatives, we must continue to invest in our technology, staff and systems. These create efficiencies for us, the State, municipalities, and our regulated community. It also saves everybody involved time and money.

In conclusion, we fully recognize that these are not easy times and the State faces difficult decisions. We will continue to perform our core roles as a watchdog agency, adjust to shifting circumstances, and set priorities to use our limited resources in the most efficient manner possible. We ask for your assistance in ensuring that we are able to meet this goal.

Thank you for your consideration of these critical matters.