Testimony SUPPORTING SB 233, An Act Concerning Elections

Senator Flexer, Representative Fox, ranking members Senator Sampson, Representative France, and esteemed members of the GAE committee: thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of SB 233, An Act Concerning Elections.

My name is Shannon Lane, and like Representative McCarthy Vahey, I am a social worker. In my role as the chair of the research committee of the Nancy A. Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work at the University of Connecticut, I research and disseminate information about voting rights and access. I also teach and conduct research at Wurzweiler School of Social Work at Yeshiva University and serve as the Deputy Registrar of Voters for Bethany Connecticut, but the views I express here are my own.

I strongly support SB 233 because of its potential to expand voting access and rights.

Disenfranchisement of those with felony convictions
Nationally, felony convictions keep nearly seven million Americans from voting. Given the racial bias within the criminal justice system, we know this disenfranchisement disproportionately affects people of color. 1 in 13 black voters have been disenfranchised nationally versus 1 in 56 nonblack voters. This bias is not accidental. Historically, felony disenfranchisement laws were written into state constitutions and statutes to explicitly limit the political power of African Americans and other marginalized groups. The impact of these laws today means that millions of people cannot vote because of their felony status. In addition, millions more don’t vote due to an array of confusing and punitive state laws that govern voting and felony convictions.

Here in Connecticut, our voting laws for those with felony convictions are the most punitive in New England. My colleagues at the Humphreys Institute and I argued in a recent article that not only should we expand voting rights to those on parole like Rhode Island, Massachusetts and New Hampshire, but we should follow Vermont and Maine in allowing all citizens to vote. Nationwide, only three states (Connecticut, Louisiana, and California) reinstate the right to vote after discharge from parole. The changes to state law in this bill would put us in the group of 16 states which reinstate voting rights after prison sentences are completed, including the geographic neighbors mentioned above. Formerly incarcerated persons who have their voting rights restored have been found to be less likely to return to prison, so this change can benefit all of us.
Voter accessibility
I also support the sections of this bill that would make voting more accessible to all in Connecticut, including modifications of election day registration, automatic voter registration, and the development of electronic signatures for election-related forms. These changes have the potential to increase voter turnout, which benefits both individuals and the communities in which they live. While many in Connecticut find the process of registering and casting a vote easy, those who vote in communities with highly mobile populations and/or strained resources can be discouraged by long lines, frustrating processes, or incomplete information, and may miss out on their opportunity to vote as a result. The changes to state law in this bill have the potential to alleviate many of those barriers.

Thank you for your time.

References