



STATE OF CONNECTICUT
STATE ELECTIONS ENFORCEMENT COMMISSION

TESTIMONY PRESENTED BEFORE THE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

February 22, 2021

***Statement of Michael J. Brandi, Executive Director & General Counsel
State Elections Enforcement Commission***

Senator Osten, Representative Walker, and honorable members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony on the Governor's Budget for Fiscal Years 2022 and 2023. I am Michael Brandi, the Executive Director and General Counsel for the State Elections Enforcement Commission. The mission of the State Election Enforcement Commission ("SEEC") is to administer and enforce the provisions of the Connecticut's election laws and to thereby ensure the public's confidence in the electoral process.

In the Governor's proposed budget there are no changes made to our requested budget and for that we would like to thank him. We hope that this committee will accept his budget as proposed. Our budget largely consists of personnel costs with a bare minimum for operating expenses. We are not asking for any increases or requesting any changes to the proposed budget.

This past year has been a trying one but it has not been without its successes for the SEEC. As an agency, SEEC continues to make every effort to streamline our services and move toward twenty-first century solutions to increase efficiency. In some ways the pandemic has hastened these efforts by encouraging remote meetings of our Commission and online trainings for candidates and treasurers. When COVID hit, SEEC staff developed ten new CEP training modules that allowed candidates and treasurers to learn about the CEP or refresh their knowledge while safely quarantining. These were well utilized, most receiving over 2,000 views. We also ran a Pre-Application Review Program, for which we heavily recruited and advertised. A record 65 committees chose to participate and thanks to their efforts, in the first six weeks of this year's grant cycle we were able to award 99 grants – 28.6% more grants than the 77 grants awarded in the same timeframe in 2018. We had the highest rate of participation ever in the 2020 primaries with all but one candidate in the 14 primaries receiving a grant. Overall, 83% of the candidates on the ballot

participated in the CEP and 94% of the elected legislature ran with only small dollar donations and a clean elections grant.

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.” Our information technology staff is now focused on developing new electronic reports to assist in more rapid and efficient review of grant application in preparation for the 2022 election cycle and to facilitate the creation of statutorily required reports. The success of such efforts can be seen in our automation of our filing processes. We have moved away from mailed paper notices in favor of targeted email notices, saving 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.

Technology and the internet are not without their challenges, however. Our agency continues to work with other federal and state agencies on cybersecurity issues. The money in our budget for information technology is being utilized to upgrade and protect our systems and we will continue to seek to leverage federal monies available for needed training for our information technology professionals. In preparation for the 2020 presidential elections we invested in computer hardware and software as well as cybersecurity training to harden our infrastructure and critical network endpoints. We continue to partner with the Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Secretary of the State, the Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection as well as DAS/BEST to ensure our cybersecurity posture is proactive given the current threat from bad actors and state-sponsored cyber threats. The SEEC is also an active member of the Election Infrastructure Information Sharing and Analysis Center (EI-ISAC), which is

operated by the Multi-State ISAC (MS-ISAC). Real time information and analysis from these groups is critical for us to maintain an effective defense against the ever-changing cyber landscape. The 2020 elections saw an unprecedented questioning of our electoral systems by some and our agency has been working hard to reassure the public. The SEEC runs a telephone hotline in conjunction with the Secretary of the State each primary and election day. This serves to increase the confidence of voters in the electoral system by allowing them to express their concerns and get answers to their questions. This year saw the highest volume of calls ever handled by SEEC staff on the day of the primary and the third highest on the day of the election. But this tells just a part of the 2020 election cycle story. Calls from concerned citizens began much earlier this cycle and continued much longer. In taking these calls, we have tried to educate the public as to the election protection measures in place, correcting misinformation and explaining processes. The Secretary of the State, the town clerks, registrars of voters and other election officials deserve praise for their efforts during these extraordinary times. The SEEC is committed to continuing to assist Connecticut's election officials and our law enforcement and technology partners in mitigating threats that undermine public confidence in our democracy through public education and by protecting against cyber threats.

Our technology increases our efficiency and improves the services we offer treasurers and candidates but —like all technology— it requires continued maintenance and upgrades. We work extremely hard at keeping the systems efficient and protected by improving our cybersecurity, automating our processes wherever possible and through cost-effective use of virtual servers in our operations. We negotiate licenses and when possible purchase multi-year licenses; however, there are upkeep costs that are unavoidable and necessary. These are our main requests, outside of personnel costs, and we have kept the amount as low as possible.

In conclusion, we fully recognize that the State continues to face difficult budgetary decisions. We will continue to perform our core roles as a watchdog agency, adjusting to shifting circumstances, and setting priorities to use 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.