



Appropriations Committee General Government A Subcommittee:

February 21, 2020

TESTIMONY OF SECRETARY OF THE STATE DENISE W. MERRILL:

Good morning Co-Chairs Anwar and Ryan, and Ranking Members Miner and Wilson, and members of the subcommittee. My name is Denise Merrill and I am the Secretary of the State of Connecticut.

As you know, the Secretary of the State's office hosts several departments, including elections administration, publications, and business services, some of which generate considerable revenue for the state. In Fiscal Year 2020, my office generated more than \$32 million annually in fees and has generated almost \$28.5 million to date in Fiscal Year 2021 (growth is accelerating due to a change in the fee schedule made in the last budget). The revenue generated by my office goes into the General Fund. Our annual operating expenses totaled roughly \$8.5 million in Fiscal Year — and the office has become leaner in recent years, which was done without impacting the service we provide to the public. When I was elected Secretary of the State, there were 85 employees of this office; today there are 69 funded positions. Modernizations we introduced over the last several years have helped this office keep up with demand despite a smaller head count.

When I submitted testimony to you last year, on February 13, 2020, I testified that the challenges of our office had shifted since 2016 and added cybersecurity of our election infrastructure as a key focus. Less than two weeks after that testimony, my staff and I, and the leadership of the associations of the registrars of voters and the town clerks, met for the first time to address how the COVID-19 crisis would affect the 2020 election. Our challenges had dramatically shifted again.

Our office, with the help of our partners at the local level, key changes made by the legislature and by executive order, and emergency federal election funding, were able to plan for and successfully administer the most closely watched election of our lifetimes. Largely working remotely, we helped the registrars and the town clerks administer the 2020 election under unprecedented circumstances. For the first time in Connecticut history, because of the contagious nature of the COVID-19 virus, every eligible voter was allowed to apply for and receive an absentee ballot. This allowed more than 650,000 voters to vote without entering the polling place, more than 35% of the more than 1.8 million votes (the most in Connecticut history) cast. At a highwater mark of more than 2.3 million active, registered voters, our turnout was close to 80% - despite the specter of the deadly pandemic.

My office implemented new technology to allow the town clerks to process, issue, and count absentee ballots more efficiently, as well as allowing voters to determine when their absentee ballot has been issued and when it had been received. We implemented several grant programs to make sure that towns had the resources necessary to handle a greater volume of absentee ballots and to keep polling places safe, provided every polling place with PPE to keep voters and poll workers safe, and deployed at least one and as many as four secure absentee ballot drop boxes to each town so that voters had a safe method of delivering their ballots without having to rely on the U.S. Postal Service.

The changes to how we vote necessarily happened quickly and closer to Election Day than anyone would have liked, so my office launched a public information campaign to educate voters on the changes and to make sure that every voter knew how to properly fill out and return their absentee ballot. Buttressed by a grant from a non-profit, we were able to take our campaign on to television, resulting in both the most absentee ballots cast in Connecticut history, and a rejection rate of less than 1%, less than half of the rejection rate from two years earlier.

All of this was made possible by three federal grants, one from the CARES Act, specifically targeted to increase access to absentee ballots and make sure safety in polling place for the 2020 election in light of COVID-19, and two grants from the Help America Vote Act designed to allow us to strengthen our cybersecurity and upgrade technology. For too long, elections have been treated as an afterthought for funding and this federal aid, albeit temporary and limited, was a welcome breath of fresh air.

Of course, as we prepared for holding an election under the cloud COVID, foreign actors were preparing to again interfere in the elections of the United States. Since the 2016 election, we have worked closely with federal authorities at the Department of Homeland Security, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency to combat the twin threats of physical interference and mis- and dis-information.

My office has taken advantage of every opportunity to strengthen our cybersecurity posture offered by the federal government. We are members of both MS- and EI-ISAC, we use Albert Network Monitoring, have had a full Risk and Vulnerability Assessment performed by DHS, and have participated in multiple tabletop cyberincident exercises, including with our election administration partners at the local level.

Increased federal funding through HAVA allowed us to make necessary improvements to our cybersecurity infrastructure at the state and the local level, including heightened password security, virtual desktop environments, and security training and support. During the election season we also worked with the Connecticut National Guard to offer security assessments to each town and implemented a Secure Polls Grant Program, a matching grant program, and town network security upgrades to upgrade hardware, software, and network connections at the local level. We also used federal funds to contract with an election misinformation specialist to allow us to identify and report misinformation before it spread. On this effort, my staff and our specialist worked closely with the misinformation team at CISA, our friends at the National Association of Secretaries of State, and our partners at the various social media platforms to identify and ultimately flag or remove misinformation that could have directly affected voters access to accurate information about casting their ballot. This program was successful in Connecticut and nationally, with a joint statement from NASS, CISA, the Election Assistance Commission, and the National Association of State Election Directors calling the 2020 election, “the most secure in American history.”

Of the roughly ten million in federal cybersecurity funds, we have roughly six million dollars remaining, committed to replacing our aging Central Voter Registration System and the Election Management System over the next year. Connecticut can be proud of the fact that we were one of the first states in the country to implement a central voter registry, but that means we now have one of the oldest systems in the country. Replacing it as it near the end of its functional life will also allow us to implement upgrades to the cybersecurity of the system. We have already begun the process of working with our partners in the local election offices to develop the requirements for the new system.

The regular business of my office must also continue, even as we deal with the COVID-19 crisis, election administration, and potential foreign attacks on our election infrastructure. We implemented a remote phone and email ticketing system to allow our staff to be able to continue to provide customer support from home. In our Business Services Division, we began the process of replacing our CONCORD business registry and worked with DAS/BEST to create the business one stop at business.ct.gov, the state’s first step toward locating all of our business services in one place to streamline business formation and maintenance. We also moved offices to the State Office Building and reduced our paper records housed in-office by 40% and housed in on-site storage by 15%. Finally, in our publications division, we upgraded our eRegulations workflow to make the process of initiating and managing proposed regulations easier and more efficient, and consolidated website, records, and publication functions to refocus efforts on effective presentation of public information, records, and data as part of my office’s role as the custodian of public records.

Over the course of the 2020 election we learned an important lesson that has informed the budget request we are making to you today. Mis- and disinformation are now a part of American elections and will remain so for the foreseeable future. In 2020 we were successful in combatting misinformation because of the temporary resources provided by the federal government, but to continue that effort we need to make those efforts permanent. I am asking you for the resources that the Secretary of the State's office needs to make sure that Connecticut's elections remain among the best, most trustworthy elections in the United States, and the world.

I am asking you to appropriate the funds necessary to hire a permanent election mis- and disinformation analyst to help us identify and report election misinformation in real-time, before it goes viral. In 2020, this contract position was critical in identifying potentially viral misinformation and reporting it to our partners at the social media platforms and at the national level. The 2020 election, and its aftermath, have been marred by multiple conspiracy theories, driven by misinformation, that are rapidly eroding Americans' trust in our elections. This position will be key in stopping the spread of misinformation before it can do lasting damage in Connecticut. Misinformation has become a fixture in American politics and many states, most notably California and Colorado, have created positions like this within the offices of their Secretaries of State.

In addition, I am asking for funding for a robust public information program to fulfill one of the core missions of our agency. You will note in the Governor's budget book that the first requirement of our agency is to "To educate and inform the public of services, programs and responsibilities of the office, and to advocate for issues, policies and programs which promote a healthy democracy and an active, engaged citizenry..."

Despite this statement of purpose, funds have not been allocated in our budget to provide basic information to the public about elections and voting. This year we were able to accomplish a positive election experience for Connecticut voters through a comprehensive public information campaign to explain how Connecticut elections are run, and what changes needed to be made in 2020 to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. This public information campaign was funded by \$600,000 from the CARES Act and an additional \$2.1 million from the Center of Election Innovation and Research, allowing us to speak directly to voters on the internet, analog and streaming radio, mobile gaming, and ultimately on cable and network television.

The success of this effort is in the numbers – more than 650,000 people voted by absentee ballot, many for the first time, and despite the newness of this method for Connecticut and its voters, less than 1% of the returned absentee ballots were rejected. The federal funding and private grant money we received last year were critical and a tremendous help, but they were temporary. I strongly urge you to fund a new line item for public information in the state budget, which you will see in our formal request. This was not included in our original budget submission to the Governor’s office since the need only emerged after our experience with the 2020 election.

We must commit to both fighting back against the dissemination of mis- and disinformation and spreading the basic facts of how our elections are run and safeguarded, and how every Connecticut citizen can register, and every registered voter can vote.

Thank you.