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- NEWS RELEASE -

SECRETARY MERRILL HONORS BRIDGEPORT CITY COUNCILOR REVEREND MARY LEE ON 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF SIGNING OF VOTING RIGHTS ACT

SECRETARY OF THE STATE GIVES CITATION TO REV. LEE WHO MARCHED FOR
VOTING RIGHTS FROM SELMA TO MONTGOMERY ALABAMA IN THE SPRING OF 1965

HARTFORD: Secretary of the State Denise Merrill today honored Bridgeport Reverend and City Councilor Mary McBride Lee with a citation on the 50th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act being signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson. Reverend Lee is a veteran member of the clergy in Bridgeport and a longtime city councilor who grew up in Selma, Alabama. As a young woman, Reverend Lee marched for voting rights in March of 1965, joining thousands of peaceful protesters in demanding voting rights and enduring a violent crackdown by the Alabama State Police. The brutal police beatings of civilians on “Bloody Sunday,” March 7, 1965 on the Edmund Pettis bridge in Selma captured live on nationwide television were the catalyst that shook the conscience of the nation and galvanized public opinion behind a federal law to ban discriminatory practices designed to disenfranchise Black voters.



“I am so humbled and honored to pay tribute to the heroes of the great American struggle for civil and voting rights such as Reverend Mary Lee,” said Secretary Merrill, Connecticut’s chief

elections official. “The bravery of Reverend Lee’s actions as a young African-American woman in the Jim Crow south fifty years ago when she and others stood up to end discriminatory voting laws is nothing short of profound. Reverend Mary Lee and all of those who marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Congressman John Lewis and others from Selma to Montgomery put their lives on the line to preserve the right to vote for all Americans, and we all stand on their shoulders today. We must be forever vigilant to protect this sacred right so that every citizen can be free to choose their government.”

Secretary Merrill honored Reverend Lee at a luncheon today sponsored by the Bridgeport chapter of the NAACP, where she also announced that the 2015 Connecticut State Register and Manual, otherwise known as the “Blue Book,” is dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Voting Rights Act.

An excerpt of the dedication reads:

“The Voting Rights Act banned states and local jurisdictions from enacting laws that instituted ‘voting qualification or prerequisite to voting, or standard, practice, or procedure ... in a manner which results in a denial or abridgement of the right ... to vote on account of race,’ color, or language minority status. The act also banned the practice of gerrymandering voting districts in such a way as to intentionally dilute the power of minority voters. The law allowed any American citizen disenfranchised by election laws violating this provision of the Voting Rights Act to sue in federal court to have these laws overturned. The Voting Rights Act established a preclearance process for all new election laws in jurisdictions with a history of racial discrimination in voting. Under federal preclearance, before a new voting law could take effect, the federal justice department evaluated it for compliance with the Voting Rights Act. This was a crucial check on state and local governments that had stood in the way of voting rights for black Americans.

Over the ensuing decades, hundreds of state and local voting laws were rejected by the federal Department of Justice after being found to violate the Voting Rights Act. The Voting Right Act of 1965 has accomplished much. Millions of black Americans have cast ballots, changed governments and elected African Americans to office at every level of government. But the law remains at the center of debates around voting in this country. On June 25, 2013, the United States Supreme Court decided *Shelby County v. Holder*. In a 5-4 decision the court effectively struck down the preclearance section of the Act, asserting that Congress relied on outdated data when renewing the law. The court said the Department of Justice had to show a current pattern of discriminatory intent in the enactment of election law, one which would harm certain groups of voters. If such a pattern were shown, then federal officials could still use the “bail-in” provision of the Voting Rights Act to subject a state or local jurisdiction to preclearance – but only based on current circumstances, not past practice.

To the plaintiffs in the case, the government of Shelby County, Alabama, the 2013 decision represented a vindication that times had changed and Jim Crow was gone. They argued that even though their predecessors had enforced white-only voting for generations, the current local government should not have to continue to pay for the sins of the past. They argued that strong enforcement of the Voting Rights Act by the federal Department of Justice had succeeded in eliminating racist practices in local election administration.

Congressman John Lewis, who had led those peaceful marchers on Bloody Sunday to meet the force of police batons, tear gas and whips, disagreed. He called the Supreme Court's decision 'a dagger in the heart of voting access.'

The Voting Rights Act was born of a century of systematic, state-sponsored efforts to deny people of color their constitutional right to vote. Despite the Supreme Court's ruling in *Holder* and the statements of some political leaders, vestiges of discrimination in voting arguably remain. After all, four members of the *Holder* court dissented, and the Act was reauthorized in 2006 by overwhelming, bi-partisan majorities who considered thousands of pages of supporting documentation.

In the immediate aftermath of *Holder*, several states previously subject to preclearance enacted new laws – like photo identification and proof of citizenship laws – that many assert discriminate against minority voters, the elderly, and the poor. So we can see there is no question that the struggle to perfect our democracy and live up to our national ideals continues.

Our charge as we mark this 50th anniversary since the enactment of the Voting Rights Act is to never forget the violence that met peace in 1965. We simply cannot take voting rights for granted or assume that once we have won a great victory for civil or human rights that the fight is over and settled. We must be forever vigilant and prevent systemic discrimination of any kind in our voting system.

Elections are the means by which we Americans govern ourselves. Those of us in public service - and all citizens - should be doing everything we can to ensure that every citizen who is eligible to vote is able to cast a ballot. Ultimately, it is up to each of us to preserve the right to vote; that we remember the darkest parts of our past; and that we carry on the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., Congressman John Lewis, President Lyndon Johnson and the many thousands of others who sacrificed so much so that all Americans could enjoy the constitutional right to vote unfettered.

As President Johnson charged us in the spring of 1965, 'Let each of us look within our own hearts and our own communities, and let each of us put our shoulder to the wheel to root out injustice wherever it exists.'

It is for those leaders and many others and with the spirit of the continued expansion of voting rights that I gratefully dedicate the 2015 State Register and Manual. We forever owe our predecessors in the civil rights movement a sincere debt of gratitude, and we must always be vigilant to protect those rights and freedoms for which so many fought and died on our behalf. May the Voting Rights Act continue to be strengthened for the next 50 years and beyond by the American Congress and judicial system, and may it be a beacon of freedom and the power of the people to change their circumstances for generations to come."

The 2015 Blue Book dedication will take place in a formal ceremony at the Connecticut State Capitol in Hartford this fall.