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For Immediate Release:  
October 15, 2013

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- STATEMENT -

## **SECRETARY MERRILL CEASES E- NEWSLETTER, ASKS FOR STATE AUDITORS TO LOOK INTO MATTER**

**Hartford** – Secretary of the State Denise Merrill today issued the following statement regarding recent questions surrounding the publication and distribution of the Secretary’s “E-Newsletter.” Secretary Merrill also announced today that she has directed her staff to cease publication of the e-newsletter and has asked the Connecticut Auditors of Public Accounts to look into the matter. A letter to the state auditors is attached to this news release.

“There are some serious questions that have been raised about the e-newsletter released by my office for the last five months. I take my official role and the public trust that comes with it very seriously, and I have always held myself and those around me to the highest standards of integrity. I take the concerns that the questions raised by these recent news reports very seriously as well, and that is why I wanted to say a few things.

This is an important time at this office. We are a few weeks from a major election, and many offices are at stake. While I take the questions that have been raised seriously, I also need to stay focused on the very important job this office has to, and won’t let the question of how my newsletter was distributed be a distraction.

First, I feel terrible that the way we sent out these newsletters has created the impression for some that I am using my office to somehow campaign for a future election. This was never the intent and I am deeply sorry if that impression has been created.

I have spent my entire career, as some have noted, being a champion for good government – but also for open government. And I believe strongly that every officeholder should be communicating with the public about what they are doing in office.

The intent of this e-newsletter program is to let people know what we are doing at the Secretary of the State’s office. It is part of our job to tell the citizens what we are doing. And doing a newsletter through email is so much cheaper than trying to send people something in the mail. So we thought it would a cost-effective, contemporary way of getting the word out there.

We also sent it out through social media – twitter and facebook – which is frankly a much better way to get it out to a broad audience. I notice many of you in the press corps receive these newsletters as followers of mine on Twitter. So this was in no way intended to be some sort of exclusive or political list. It was simply a place to start.

In hindsight, I can see now how this created a bad impression, and I take full responsibility for that simple fact. Every human being makes mistakes, and I am no different. The important thing is to recognize when you have a problem, and take corrective action. And that is what I am going to do:

Number one – we are stopping the e-newsletter. Even though I had perfectly good intentions when we started the project, I think this effort is now tainted and we certainly cannot proceed with the current distribution process we have in place now.

Number two – today I have sent a letter to our state auditors asking them to look into this matter. If there is a real problem from a legal or regulatory point of view with how we did our e-newsletter, I want to know what it is.

That would be helpful not only for me and my staff but for the hundreds of Connecticut office holders – Democrats and Republicans – who put out similar e-newsletters. Who should be receiving these communications? What lists are OK and which are not?

Number three – today I am going to lay out all of the information I know about our e-newsletter and I will answer all questions about it in the future.

I took the weekend to make sure I understood how the list was developed, who did the work, where it came from, and when it was done. I know some of you thought I took too long, but I thought it was important to really try to understand all the facts.

About the list of recipients to the e-newsletter: It is true, much of this list did come from my 2010 campaign. But many of the contacts of that list were my own personal contacts before there ever was a campaign.

These are my friends, my family, and my professional and political contacts from more than 20 years in public life. And truth be told, I did not have a database of people where I listed their political affiliations or preferences. No one should be surprised, however, that most of my personal contacts are going to be Democrats. I am a Democrat.

So the campaign list included lists of people and email addresses from a number of different sources. Once the campaign was over in 2010, that list became my own personal property. The list was put together and maintained on private computers by some of my staff on their own private time, not while in the office.

The idea for doing a newsletter literally came to me as I travelled the state talking to different groups about civic engagement, and every time I would tell people about what I was doing or a new initiative from my office, they would say gee I didn't know about that, why aren't you sending out more information? This was particularly true in Fairfield County where news about Hartford is much more sparse. And, not shocked that our office is not front page news every day, I said maybe we should do a little newsletter and inform people what we are doing.

The idea to use the campaign list was simply a need to start with some list – the list of contacts I had personally. Also, if I used this list, I would not need to waste taxpayer’s money and buy another list of people. So I was trying to save money. Since using the initial list from the campaign we have added nearly 150 people – of all different political affiliations in a non-discriminating way to the list of recipients. We have Republicans, Democrats and unaffiliated people on our list. And to tell you the truth, I never checked the party affiliation of who was on there, I just wanted as wide a distribution of this as e-newsletter as possible. That is why not only did we send it out directly to individuals, we also pushed it out through our social media sites Facebook and Twitter. So anyone looking online can see this newsletter and sign up to receive it. Over time, the list would grow from the foundational list to include anyone who signed up and anyone we might have added.

If you look at the content of these e-newsletters, they are not political, this is informational. And as an elected official you bet I am going to tell people how I am doing the job they elected me to do. The real problem here is how we designed this project, and the impression it has created.

But I can see now that the impression this has caused is negative, and for that I am deeply sorry. Although I didn’t personally build the list, the buck stops here. If blame is to be assigned, I’ll take. And while I don’t think there is anything either legally or ethically wrong with sending out communications in this way, I need to assure the public that this is the case. This is why I have asked the auditors to take a look at these issues. And I pledge to cooperate fully with any information they seek from me or my staff.”