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State of Connecticut

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Appropriations Committee General Government A Subcommittee

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Written Testimony of
Secretary of the State Stephanie Thomas

Dear Co-Chairs Osten and Walker; Ranking Members Somers and Ackert; Vice Chairs Hartley, Exum, Kushner and Paris; Sub-Committee Co-Chair Anwar; and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide this written testimony. It comes to you at a moment when election administration is no longer a routine function of government, but a front-line responsibility.

Protecting Elections Means Preparing for the Unexpected

Across the country, elections and democratic institutions are under increasing strain—from federal actions that blur constitutional lines, from misinformation that erodes public trust, and from escalating threats to election infrastructure and election workers. As Attorney General William Tong said last week, when it comes to elections, “we’re at Defcon 1.”

If that assessment is accurate — and I believe it is — then our response must match the moment. Maintaining election security is no longer sufficient. We must be prepared for disruption, pressure, and unexpected attacks on the systems that allow people to vote freely and confidently.

That preparation requires sustained, stable funding for the Office of the Secretary of the State.

Restore \$900,000 to Keep Elections Operational and Secure

I want to address directly the \$900,000 reduction to our FY27 budget that we have been informed resulted from a misunderstanding regarding the nature of these funds.

In conversations our Office has had with the Governor's Office, and the Office of Policy and Management, it's become clear that this funding was mistakenly interpreted as supporting items that were discretionary or optional. In reality, these funds support election administration that is essential, ongoing, and legally required.

At this point, no harm has been done. But if these funds are not restored, the consequences will be immediate and significant.

Election systems cannot be paused, downsized, or reconstituted mid-cycle. Once capacity is lost – whether in staffing, training, system maintenance, or municipal support – it cannot be quickly rebuilt when an emergency arises.

Without restoration of the \$900,000, the following would be impacted:

- **\$180,000 for the design, printing, and statewide distribution of required election materials**, including voter registration forms (required by CGS § 9-23g) and absentee ballot applications (required by CGS § 9-139a), which ensure uniform compliance across all 169 municipalities.
- **\$58,000 for Connecticut's membership in Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC)**, a multi-state partnership that improves the accuracy of voter rolls.
- **\$268,000 for statewide software licensing, as well as the maintenance and support of backup polling place and high-speed voting tabulators** under our contract with Election Systems & Software (ES&S) for Connecticut's newly deployed voting tabulators – equipment that was successfully used during the 2025 municipal elections and is essential to reliable, auditable voting. In the event of an emergency, these 100+ backup high- and medium-speed tabulators would be available to municipalities.
- **\$625,700 to the UConn Center for Voting Technology Research**, which serves as the state's election technology and security expert, responsible for conducting post-election audits required by CGS § 9-320f, building the statewide database required by Connecticut's Voting Rights Act (CGS § 9-368k), and providing ongoing technical expertise on voting technology.

- **\$49,400 to the UConn School of Public Policy to administer and annually update the Registrar of Voters Certification Program** required by CGS § 9-192a, including maintaining the online learning platform, updating content to reflect changes in law, and providing qualified instructors.
- **\$1,025,000 for our multi-year build-out of TotalVote**, Connecticut’s new voter registration system, which my office is required to maintain pursuant to CGS § 9-50b. Critical to maintaining real-time accuracy, security, and statewide consistency, the system is replacing aging infrastructure that is over twenty-five years old.
- **\$5,859 to maintain the secure American Association of Motor Vehicles Administrators connection with the Department of Motor Vehicles**, which is required for automatic voter registration pursuant to CGS § 9-19h and ensures accurate, efficient updates to the voter rolls without shifting administrative burden to local election officials.
- **\$4,900 for an annual subscription to GIS software, which is required to administer the Connecticut Voting Rights Act** and to operate the new voter registration system—both of which rely on geographic data to ensure accurate districting analysis, equitable voter access, and compliance with state law.
- **\$6,074 for DocuSign, which enables political parties to submit legally required endorsement statements electronically**, ensuring secure, timely filings without adding administrative burden to local election officials.
- **\$12,000 for the annual license to maintain the state’s public election results archive**, which provides transparent, permanent access to official election results and supports public trust by allowing outcomes to be independently reviewed and verified.

- **\$300,000 for required maintenance of Connecticut’s existing voter registration and election management systems**, ensuring these core systems remain secure, functional, and available to every municipality during elections and before the transition to TotalVote.
- **\$1,550 for the translation of election materials into Spanish**, which is required to ensure language access for eligible voters, support compliance with the state and federal Voting Rights Acts, and allow voters to understand election rules, deadlines, and safeguards so their ballots can be cast correctly and counted.
- **\$795,050 for the IVS contract providing ADA-compliant ballot-marking devices**, which are required by CGS § 9-247, the Help America Vote Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act, ensuring voters with disabilities can cast a private, independent, and verifiable ballot in every municipality.
- **\$12,600 for an annual subscription to LexisNexis**, which is required by our election attorneys to conduct timely legal research, interpret election statutes and regulations, and ensure the Office provides accurate guidance and remains compliant with state and federal election law.
- **\$36,000 for the Zendesk system, which will allow our elections attorneys track and manage communications with town election officials**, ensuring timely and consistent responses, and collecting metrics that allow our Office to identify recurring issues, target training, and prevent small problems from escalating during elections.
- **\$2,700 for secure storage and retrieval of archived election records**, ensuring legal compliance, record preservation, and timely access for audits and public records requests.

These investments are among what form the backbone of Connecticut’s election infrastructure. Removing funding for any one of them would weaken the entire system and shift risk and cost to municipalities, which lack the capacity to absorb it.

Uncertain Federal Support Requires Strong State-Level Election Cybersecurity

As you may know, recent federal reductions to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) have already had tangible effects on election cybersecurity nationwide, including here in Connecticut.

Federal reductions in funds and services have shifted both responsibilities and costs to states, which makes the restoration of the \$900,000 even more necessary as we work to ensure Connecticut's level of readiness.

For years, CISA served as a critical partner to Connecticut and its municipalities, providing real-time threat intelligence, incident-response coordination, security assessments, training, and emergency support. These services did not appear as line items in the state budget because they were federally funded and centrally coordinated. As those supports are reduced or withdrawn, the responsibility and cost shifts directly to the state and its towns.

At this time, the only dollar figure that can be stated with certainty relates to delayed or at-risk federal grants that previously supported cybersecurity training and related protections for state and local election officials. The loss of these funds and grants totals \$130,882.50, an amount the state would need to replace to avoid eliminating or postponing these essential activities.

Beyond that figure, however, the true cost to Connecticut is not yet calculable. This is not because the amount will be small, but because the services being withdrawn were previously provided universally and without charge. The Department of Homeland Security/CISA has issued a tiered fee structure based on annual operating costs for continued access to certain cybersecurity services. Yet Connecticut's election system is uniquely decentralized, with 169 municipalities effectively functioning as 169 distinct election jurisdictions, each of which would fall into different cost tiers. This structure makes it impossible at this stage to project an accurate statewide total for replacing these services across all towns.

Even at the state level alone, the Secretary of the State's Office estimates that replacing a portion of the lost CISA support would require a minimum of \$2,000–\$3,000 per month in new, ongoing costs — an expense that did not previously exist. That estimate does not include the cumulative costs that municipalities would face to maintain comparable protections, nor the additional staffing and coordination required to replicate federally provided functions.

Without these investments, Connecticut faces increased cyber risk at both the state and municipal levels at precisely the moment when elections require heightened vigilance, rapid response, and sustained public confidence.

An Office That Supports Elections, Businesses, and Public Confidence

Among its many responsibilities, the Office of the Secretary of the State serves as the guardian of Connecticut's democratic infrastructure. Our core responsibilities include administering elections, protecting voter access, maintaining statewide election systems, and ensuring compliance with both state and federal law, all while supporting municipalities, safeguarding civil rights, and providing essential services that keep the state functioning.

At the same time, the Office is also responsible for a broad scope of non-election services that are critical to Connecticut's economic health and legal framework, including business filings, commercial records, licensing, and authentication services relied upon by businesses, courts, and residents every day. This Business Services work makes our Office one of Connecticut's most significant revenue-generating agencies.

In FY24-25, the Office generated \$55.6 million in revenue for the General Fund, while operating on \$11.9 million in expenses. This revenue is made possible by the efficient, customer-facing work of our Business Services Division, while our elections function — by design — prioritizes integrity, access, and public trust over revenue generation. Few agencies deliver that level of return while also safeguarding a core constitutional function.

While our Office touches many areas of state government, our nonpartisan election work must remain a primary focus, particularly in today's political climate. Voters need to understand how our elections work and why they can trust them. Democracy is not a secondary service. It is the foundation upon which every other function of government rests, including economic growth, public confidence, and the rule of law. Fully funding our office is not just a budgetary decision. It is an investment in the systems that allow Connecticut to grow and function.

Support from Our Agency Reduces Local Towns' Burdens

Cuts to the Secretary of the State's budget do not remain at the state level. They shift costs and risk directly onto Connecticut's 169 towns and cities.

Local election officials, many of whom are part-time and operating with limited municipal resources, depend on centralized systems and support provided by our office. That includes the Centralized Voter Registration System (CVRS),

the Centralized Voter Registration System (CVRS), secure connectivity, voter registration forms, absentee ballot materials, and mandatory training for registrars, moderators, and poll workers.

Every dollar the Secretary of the State invests in election administration is a dollar municipalities do not have to raise locally. When that funding is reduced, towns are left with fewer resources, greater administrative burden, and increased risk of error or inconsistency.

This does not make elections more secure. It makes them more fragile.

Proven Success That Needs to be Continued

Connecticut's recent election reforms demonstrate what is possible when elections are funded responsibly.

Early voting was not only implemented successfully and securely in Connecticut, it was embraced by voters. In 2024, 40 percent of all who voted in the presidential election cast their ballots during the early voting period, followed by 23 percent in the 2025 municipal elections. That level of participation demonstrates both public trust in the system and the operational readiness of the state and its municipalities. Importantly, each of these election cycles included a state appropriation to help towns offset the added costs of early voting — \$1 million in 2024 and \$2 million in 2025 — allowing municipalities to staff locations appropriately, maintain security, and administer multi-day voting periods without sacrificing other local services. As a result, early voting reduced Election Day congestion and gave voters greater flexibility, while maintaining bipartisan oversight, chain-of-custody protections, and real-time voter check-in through the Centralized Voter Registration System. As the FY27 budget currently stands, 2026 would be the first early voting cycle without any such municipal support, placing at risk the consistency and success Connecticut has deliberately built.

In FY26, the state also undertook the first major modernization of its voting equipment in nearly 20 years, replacing 2,750 outdated tabulators statewide. These new machines brought critical advances, including improved reliability, clearer voter interfaces, enhanced accessibility features, and faster processing, all while continuing to use paper ballots and remaining fully disconnected from the internet. Their deployment for the

2025 municipal elections was successful, with significantly fewer equipment failures and greater confidence among voters and election officials alike.

These results were not accidental. They reflect sustained investment, careful planning, and close collaboration between the Secretary of the State's Office and all 169 municipalities. Together, we strengthened compliance, improved consistency across jurisdictions, reduced administrative strain on local officials, and reinforced voter confidence at a time when trust in elections nationally is under pressure. One of the added results was increased turnout in the 2025 municipal election, with 36% of registered voters casting votes, compared to 34% in 2023 or 32% in 2021.

Necessary Budget Additions to Reduce Long-Term Risk and Support

Municipalities Additional investments would also strengthen election administration statewide. These are not expansions for expansion's sake. They are targeted, preventative investments that reduce long-term risk and cost, support municipalities, and reinforce public confidence. They include:

- **\$200,000 to fully fund statewide accessibility for voters with disabilities.** State and federal law require that voters with disabilities be able to cast a private, independent ballot. The Governor's budget funds \$595,050 of the \$795,050 required to maintain these systems, leaving a \$200,000 gap created by increased maintenance costs previously covered by federal funds. This is not an enhancement. It is a legal obligation. Underfunding accessibility exposes the state to legal, financial, and reputational risk, as well as places the burden on voters who already face barriers to participation.
- **\$385,000 added for base funding + fringe for staffing and operating a Municipal Election Accountability Board.** Modeled after the state's successful Municipal Accountability Review Board (MARB), the proposed Municipal Election Accountability Board (MEAB) would provide structured oversight and technical assistance to resolve persistent municipal election administration issues that do not rise to the level of State Elections Enforcement Commission action, but still require timely correction, such as:
 - Repeated mistakes in ballot handling or check-in procedures

- Ongoing disputes between local election officials that delay or undermine administration
- Failure to correctly implement required procedures outlined in manuals, handbooks, or regulations
- Recurring voter access and staffing problems that signal systemic weakness rather than intentional wrongdoing

Recent election cycles have shown that as election laws grow more complex with early voting and new technology, the MEAB would help resolve issues early and reduce the likelihood of costly failures or state intervention after problems escalate. This is a preventative investment that protects both municipalities and voters while reinforcing public confidence in election outcomes.

- **Add \$2.5 Million for a Statewide Public Voter Information Campaign.** When voters understand the rules, deadlines, and safeguards governing early voting, absentee ballots, and Election Day procedures, the likelihood of misinformation, coercion, and fraud are significantly reduced. This funding would support a coordinated statewide public education campaign explaining the components of elections that voters often get wrong:
 - Where and when to vote
 - Absentee ballot procedures
 - How to recognize and report irregularities
 - How new voting options work

Our recent voter education campaign in Bridgeport ahead of the 2025 municipal elections demonstrated that targeted, multilingual public education can meaningfully reduce confusion around absentee ballot rules, while directly complementing election monitoring and enforcement efforts. This experience mirrors what Connecticut has seen statewide when similar investments were made in prior election cycles.

When two \$2 million voter education campaigns took place in 2020 and 2022 — in 2020 through a grant and in 2022 by the state with ARPA funds — a significant portion of the outreach focused on one of the most common and preventable errors in absentee voting: voters failing to sign the inner envelope. In 2016, before that level of education was in place,

the absentee ballot rejection rate was approximately 2 percent, largely due to missing signatures. Following the 2020 and 2022 public information campaigns, that rejection rate was cut roughly in half, to about 1 percent, preserving thousands of ballots that would otherwise have been rejected.

In 2024, when no comparable statewide campaign was funded, the rejection rate rose again to nearly 2 percent, demonstrating that voter education is not optional or self-sustaining. It must be renewed each cycle to be effective.

This issue becomes even more urgent as Connecticut considers no-excuse absentee voting. Expanding access will rightly increase the number of absentee ballots cast, many of them from voters with little or no prior experience voting this way. Without a robust, statewide public education campaign explaining the process clearly and repeatedly, that expansion risks producing higher rejection rates and unintended disenfranchisement. Thus, a \$2.5 million investment in voter education is not simply outreach. It is a safeguard that ensures expanded access results in counted votes, not preventable errors.

- **Add \$400,000 in FY27 and Annually Thereafter for a Permanent Risk-Limiting Audit Framework.** Risk-limiting audits (RLA) are widely recognized as a national best practice for verifying election outcomes. They provide statistically sound confirmation that reported results match voter-verifiable paper ballots, with the number of ballots audited tied to the margin of victory. Connecticut has already completed pilots and working group recommendations, and bipartisan support for implementation has been consistent. Compared to the scale of Connecticut elections, and the potential cost of contested or mistrusted outcomes, this is a highly cost-effective investment in transparency and trust.
- **Add \$5 Million for Early Voting Support to Municipalities.** As mentioned above, early voting was not only successfully implemented in 2024 and 2025, it was widely used. Turnouts demonstrate strong public enthusiasm, making clear that early voting is here to stay. Meeting that demand requires sustained funding for municipalities to support the staffing, training, facilities, technology, and security needed for a multi-day voting period.

Conclusion

Connecticut has chosen a careful, deliberate approach to democracy — one grounded in local administration, bipartisan oversight, transparency, and trust. That approach has served our state well, even as election systems elsewhere have been strained by misinformation, interference, and escalating threats.

But that system only works if it is funded to function, especially at a time when federal support for election security and cybersecurity is being reduced, and responsibilities once shared at the national level are increasingly being transferred to the states. These changes do not make elections more stable. They make preparedness at the state level more essential.

This is an unusually volatile moment for elections. Cyber threats are evolving rapidly, public trust is under sustained pressure, and municipalities are being asked to administer more complex election processes with fewer external supports. In this environment, reducing investment in election infrastructure would increase risk at precisely the wrong time.

If elections are truly at Defcon 1, then underfunding the Office charged with protecting them is a risk Connecticut cannot afford to take. I respectfully urge the Committee to restore the \$900,000 reduction, fully fund accessibility for voters with disabilities, and invest in the targeted election infrastructure, cybersecurity capacity, and public education necessary to keep Connecticut's elections fair, secure, and resilient in the years ahead.

Thank you for your time and your commitment to safeguarding democracy in Connecticut.

Respectfully submitted,



Stephanie Thomas
Secretary of the State of Connecticut