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Secretary Merrill Releases Connecticut's Election Plan in the Face of COVID-19

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DENISE W. MERRILL
SECRETARY OF THE STATE
CONNECTICUT

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Secretary Merrill Releases Connecticut's Election Plan in the Face of COVID-19

Federal funding allowed Secretary Merrill to develop a plan that ensures Connecticut's elections will be safe, secure, and accessible for all voters

HARTFORD – Secretary of the State Denise Merrill today released the Connecticut plan for the August 11 primary and November 3 general elections in 2020 in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. COVID-19, as a virus that passes via direct person-to-person contact, often from asymptomatic people, is a global pandemic that creates particular challenges for election administration. The plan is attached and can be found at myvote.ct.gov/2020Plan (<http://myvote.ct.gov/2020Plan>).

"No Connecticut voter should ever have to choose between their health and their right to vote," said Secretary Merrill. "This plan is designed to ensure that Connecticut's elections will be safe, secure, and accessible to every eligible voter who wants to participate. Connecticut's elections must go on, so I urge everyone who can to participate."

"As local election officials, our most important job is to make sure that every eligible Connecticut voter that wants to vote is able to cast their ballot," said Westport Registrar of Voters Marla Cowden. "Secretary Merrill's plan protects our democracy by allowing voters the opportunity to cast their ballots without the fear of putting their health at risk."

The Office of the Secretary of the State, following guidelines issued by the Center for Disease Control, will work with the municipalities to give them the resources they need to make in-person voting as safe as it can possibly be, even in the face of a pandemic. This includes approving towns' plans for polling place locations and layouts, staffing levels, emergency plans, and cleaning and safety materials needed. The Office, through the Safe Polls grant program, will be able to provide the resources necessary to secure the cleaning and safety equipment, as well as cleaning the polling places themselves and hiring additional poll workers, that will keep our voters and our poll workers safe. The Office will also be able to help the towns recruit and train poll workers for Election Day. Finally, it is important that voters know what measures their state and local election administrators have taken to protect their safety, so the Office will conduct a Safe Polls public education campaign to make sure that voters trust the safety of their polling places.

"Connecticut voters have been making their voices heard in-person, in their local polling places for more than 200 years, and for many voters that won't change in 2020," said Secretary Merrill. "That's why I am committed to working with our partners at the local level to ensure that our polling places are following the most up-to-date health guidelines, and are clean and safe for every voter and every poll worker."

The Office of the Secretary is also going to leverage cybersecurity funding to protect our elections from malicious actors at both the state and local levels. Working with the Office of the Secretary, the Connecticut National Guard will perform a high-level cybersecurity assessment of the election infrastructure of each of Connecticut's 169 towns. The Office has identified approximately 20 towns that have had chronic connectivity issues to the state's election infrastructure, and will be providing network upgrades in these towns to prevent potential security risks. The Office is also instituting a grant program whereby the Office will pay for 50% of the upgrade when towns commit to replacing outdated hardware and software, and is supporting our towns with more online certification and

security training, a dedicated trainer, and Election Support Officers to serve as field support on a regional basis. Also at the local level, the Office has successfully piloted and will be rolling out statewide a Virtual Desktop Infrastructure to increase security at the local access point to the Central Voter Registration System (CVRS), the backbone of Connecticut's election administration system.

Over the past year, the Office has significantly upgraded the security of the CVRS by instituting complex password and dual-factor authentication requirements. As one of the first centralized voter registration databases in the country, Connecticut's CVRS is nearing the end of its useful and secure life, and requires a comprehensive upgrade in the near future. The Office has begun planning for CVRS' eventual replacement and will begin implementation at the end of the 2020 cycle. In the near term, due to the complexity of the legacy code, the Office has frozen that code in place for the 2020 election cycle to prevent the creation of security risks.

"Since the Russians attempted to interfere in our election in 2016, cybersecurity has become one of our highest priorities," said Secretary Merrill. "All the information we have received from the federal intelligence community indicates that various malicious actors are still seeking to disrupt our elections, but Connecticut is partnering with federal, state, and local officials to make our cybersecurity as strong as it can be, and our elections among the most secure in the country."

The circumstances of the current pandemic make physically appearing in a polling place difficult or impossible for many voters. In an effort to ensure that every eligible voter who wants to cast a ballot is able to do so, the Office of the Secretary, contracting with a mail house, will be sending applications for absentee ballots to every registered voter in the state, and including postage paid return for those applications. After processing at the local level, those voters who request absentee ballots will be delivered ballots via the mail house, and the cost of both the mailing and return of the absentee ballot will be borne by the Office of the Secretary of the State. The Office is also providing the the towns with the resources necessary to deal with the anticipated increase in absentee ballots, including providing every town with secure dropboxes and offering a grant program that can be used to defray additional costs and personnel related to a larger number of absentee ballots. This plan will allow a larger number of voters to vote by absentee ballot than ever before, and do it at no cost to the towns or the voters.

"We are facing an illness without precedent in our lifetimes and our election system has to adapt to meet its challenge," said Secretary Merrill. "By making sure that every voter who needs an absentee ballot is able to get one without cost to the voter or to their town, we are safeguarding Connecticut voters' ability to participate in choosing their government. And make no mistake – fear of the coronavirus will guarantee that we will be seeing a higher volume of absentee ballots in 2020 whether we like it or not."

In both 2016 and 2018, the towns with highest total number of absentee ballots were Greenwich, Fairfield, Norwalk, Stamford, and West Hartford, and the towns with highest percentage of absentee ballots cast were Canaan, Roxbury, Salisbury, Sharon, Washington, Wesport, and Weston.

The plan relies on funding from the recently passed CARES Act specifically earmarked to making polling places safer and expanding accessibility to voting by mail, as well as additional appropriations made to protect the cybersecurity and integrity of elections from the Help America Vote Act (HAVA).

"This plan was only possible through the hard work of our federal delegation in securing federal funding in the CARES Act and in appropriating additional funding from HAVA," said Secretary Merrill. "They recognize that our citizen's voice is their vote, and have made sure that our voters' voices will be heard."

"Access to the ballot box is a fundamental right of every American citizen," said Connecticut's Congressional Delegation. "During this pandemic it is vital that states take steps to ensure that everyone can cast their vote in a manner consistent with health and social distancing guidelines. With the assistance of funding from the CARES Act and under Secretary Merrill's bold leadership, Connecticut is taking the lead to ensure our state residents can safely vote in upcoming elections."

The plan is attached and can be found at myvote.ct.gov/2020Plan (<http://myvote.ct.gov/2020Plan>).

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