Absentee ballot process smooth so far

Blumenthal wants more election funding

By Alex Putterman

Bloomfield – The process of mailing ballot applications to all eligible Connecticut primary voters has gone smoothly thus far, Secretary of State Denise Merrill said Monday, as she and U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal pushed for greater federal funding for voting access.

Connecticut will hold primary elections on Aug. 11, ahead of the Nov. 3 general election.

“This year of all years, people need options to exercise their rights to vote,” Merrill said at a news conference in Bloomfield, standing at one of the new official ballot boxes her office has begun distributing to all 169 towns. “We want to make sure all the options are safe and secure.”

Merrill said the state benefited from $5 million in federal funding as part of the CARES Act, which has helped town officials distribute ballot applications and install the ballot boxes. Blumenthal, who appeared with Merrill at the news conference, urged Republicans in the U.S. Senate to pass the HEROES Act, which would direct $3.6 billion in emergency funding to help states increase ballot access, including about $45 million to Connecticut.

Blumenthal said the initial $5 million had been “well-used” but was “a drop in the bucket compared to what’s needed.”

Gabe Rosenberg, a spokesman for Merrill, said the $45 million in additional funding would go toward new voting machines, new tabulators, more ballot boxes, voter education and enhanced cybersecurity. He said the funds, if distributed promptly, could ease a potentially chaotic Election Day in November.

“It’s going to take a long time to count because we don’t have high-speed ballot counters,” Rosenberg said. “That’s something we could buy with that kind of money.”

Blumenthal said he expected Connecticut’s elections would run smoothly as long as the state legislature passed mail-in voting legislation during an upcoming special session. Rep. Bobby Gibson, a Bloomfield Democrat, who was also at the news conference, expressed confidence that lawmakers would find consensus on a bill.

Asked about claims from some local Republicans, as well as President Donald Trump, that voting by mail will result in increased fraud, Merrill noted that fraud is rare, that it is punishable by jail time and a large fine and that local officials have extensive procedures to verify ballots.

“This fear, which is completely unproven, is very damaging,” she said. “That’s what is upsetting to me. People are questioning our democracy, in a situation when we have checks and balances like almost no other state.”

At the press conference Monday in Bloomfield, the town’s registrars of voters said in any instance when someone questions a ballot, they pull the person’s voter registration card and compare the signature there against the one on the ballot.
State Republican Party Chairman J.R. Romano recently said he was worried about ballot applications being sent to people who had died. Merrill said some errors were inevitable but that misdirected applications would not lead to fraud unless recipients were willing to forge signatures and risk jail time. Rosenberg noted that applications are typically available online and that distributing them by mail was merely meant to ease the process for voters.

As for the security of the new ballot boxes, Merrill said the receptacles were no less secure than a typical mailbox.

“Just think of this as a mailbox,” she said. “The usual way you send back your ballot for 100 years is you send it back in the mail. This is just a fancy mailbox, and it’s here for a reason, because many town halls are still not open for business all the time.”

Blumenthal expressed frustration with what he views as a partisan campaign against mail-in voting.

“These false fears are really a form of voter suppression,” he said. “It’s a matter of strategy to discourage people from absentee or mail-in balloting, and frankly it’s a very purposeful and intention strategy that has partisan motives.”

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