Challenges await in presidential primary

Towns, cities prepare for Aug. 11 vote amid COVID-19 concerns

By Eliza Fawcett

Even with federal funds to cover COVID-19-related election expenses, Connecticut towns face a slew of challenges in the lead-up to the Aug. 11 primary, from enforcing social distancing to bracing for a wave of absentee ballots and scrambling to line up enough poll workers.

As the coronavirus pandemic continues to surge across the country, the August primary will prove a crucial test run for the Nov. 3 general election, which will likely confront similar health and safety logistics.

In Connecticut, every town and city has submitted a “Safe Polls Plan” to the state, making each eligible for funds to cover the cost of extra personal protective equipment, additional personnel and other expenses incurred due to the coronavirus pandemic, Secretary of the State Denise Merrill said last week. Additionally, the state is sending a package of PPE to every polling location.

Gabe Rosenberg, a spokesperson for Merrill, said that the “Safe Polls” grants would be funded through the $5.4 million allotted to Connecticut by the federal government for COVID-19-related election expenses. As of now, there are no figures for the range of the grants, since most proposals have not yet been approved by the state, he said.

Tom Smith, the Democratic registrar for Cheshire, said that a number of details still need to be nailed down for the town’s primary, from acquiring enough poll workers to the logistics of how to sanitize voters’ pens.

“We’re going have to do this because we have to,” he said. “Failure is not an option.”

Searching for poll workers

One major issue some towns are facing is that their usual poll workers — who tend to skew older — are not as comfortable working this election year due to COVID-19 risks.

In Cornwall, town officials went through their lists of potential workers and tried to reach out to younger people, including college students who are living at home.

“Most of our workers on a regular basis are older, so we didn’t want to ask them because we didn’t want to put them on the spot or have them feel bad,” said Cara Weigold, the Republican registrar of voters.

Bracing for a potential shortage of poll workers, Merrill announced a statewide recruitment drive for poll workers earlier this month. Connecticut, which has nearly 800 polling places in 169 cities and towns, requires at least three workers at each site, according to officials.
The state has also allowed towns to reduce the number of workers at each polling station or consolidate tasks to facilitate social distancing.

“I would say a good 50% of our regulars are not able to do it, either because of their own concerns or family members who could be compromised and they’re doing it out of safety for them,” said Smith, the Democratic registrar for Cheshire.

He added that Cheshire still needs about a dozen poll workers and is also looking to hire extra absentee ballot counters in preparation for a potentially overwhelming number of mail-in ballots.

Socially-distanced voting

The logistics of preparing for a safe Primary Day range from ensuring a socially-distant flow of voters through the polling site to determining how to keep writing implements virus-free.

Election guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention include having hand sanitizer available at each step of the voting process. Voters should stay 6 feet apart, and masks are encouraged for voters and workers, among other recommendations.

In Waterbury, the local fire department has been conducting walk-throughs of each of the city’s 20 polling locations to map out appropriate social distancing and the most efficient ways to get voters in and out, said town Democratic registrar Teresa Begnal.

Weigold, the Republican registrar in Cornwall — which has about 1,300 people and one polling location — said that the key to the primary will be making sure that voters do not congregate in the same spot.

“People from a small town see one another and they want to talk. That seems like it might be a bit of a challenge, keeping people 6 feet apart,” she said.

Cheshire, which has seven polling places, has ordered plexiglass shields for poll checkers and moderators, Democratic registrar Smith said. Privacy booths where voters fill out their ballots will also be continuously sanitized throughout the day.

“We’re working on the pen issue,” he added. “If we’re going to use reusable pens, we’re going to have to have them sanitized.”

In Waterbury, polling locations are planning to provide voters with single-use golf pencils, Begnal said. And in Cornwall, town officials killed two birds with one stone when they decided to order customized pens that read “I Voted,” which voters can use to fill out their ballots.

“The voter can come in, pick up the pen, take it home with them, and instead of receiving a sticker saying they voted — which would involve being close to one another to exchange that sticker — they have a pen,” Weigold said.

A flood of absentee ballots

One of Gov. Ned Lamont’s executive orders permitted the state to send 1.2 million absentee ballot applications to every active registered Democrat and Republican in Connecticut for the primary. About 120 ballot boxes have been delivered across the state to serve as a special drop boxes for voters’ completed absentee ballots.
Some towns have already seen massive influxes of absentee ballots.

In 2016, Waterbury recorded 323 absentee ballots in the presidential preference primary. Four years later, the town has already received more than 2,800 applications for absentee ballots for the primary, according to town clerk Antoinette Spinelli.

Lisbeth Becker, the Republican registrar of voters for Glastonbury, said that the town would normally have maybe 300 to 500 absentee ballots for a primary.

“In a general election, our highest has been 2,000,” she said. “And so far, we have received an excess of 3,000 absentee ballot applications.”

She added that voters who are unaffiliated and want to switch into a party to vote in the primary must do so before noon on Aug. 10. But a voter hoping switch parties must have done so three months before the Aug. 11 primary.

Manchester has already received about 4,200 absentee ballot applications, according to Republican registrar of voters Timothy Becker.

But ballot applications represent just the first step in the process, he emphasized. After a ballot application is sent in and processed, the voter will receive their ballot in the mail. Then, they must fill out the ballot, put it in an envelope, sign and date the envelope, put it in another post-paid envelope and mail it back to the town clerk.

“If the voter does not sign that inside envelope, the ballot can’t be counted. So it’s really important, and if you’re not used to doing absentee ballots, you might forget,” he said.

In Cornwall, Weigold said that absentee ballot applications had been rolling in — and the town was finding that many voters did not realize that they could still vote in-person on Aug. 11 if they preferred to do so.

“We kind of feel as though we won’t get a lot [of voters] to the polls,” she said.