Town clerks preparing for a lot of mail this fall

Secretary of state aims to send out absentee ballot applications to every registered voter

By Michael Hamad

With the Secretary of the State planning to mail absentee ballot applications for the November election to the more than 2.1 million registered voters this fall, town clerks say they are preparing for a deluge of mail.

“We’re dealing with land records, vital statistics, funeral directors, marriage licenses,” Essie Labrot, town clerk in West Hartford, said. “This ballot process on top of our regular work: it’s overwhelming. I’m looking at potentially doing 30,000 absentee ballots out of this office.”

In the Aug. 11 primary, nearly 227,000 voters used absentee ballots, compared with roughly 72,000 in-person votes, due to fears over the coronavirus pandemic. If that trend continues in the next election, municipal office will be receiving thousands more ballots.

“For the November election, it will be a Herculean task,” said Bristol town clerk Therese Pac. “We will be probably looking at somewhere between 25,000 and 30,000 ballots. ... You hear the stress in my voice, and hopefully you also hear the fear in my voice.”

Clerks requiring additional staff members may run out of space because of social distancing requirements brought about by the coronavirus pandemic. “I have no room in my office for 10 people,” Pac said. “I don’t have equipment for 10 people, and I don’t have telephones for 10 people.”

Connecticut Town Clerks Association president and Windsor town clerk Anna Posniak said the current system was built to process 5% to 7% of the total electorate casting an absentee ballot, and that the percentage may reach 80% in the general election.

Each ballot application that goes out will include an insert “better explaining the process and timeline for ballot distribution,” according to an email sent to town clerks on Tuesday by director of elections Theodore Bromley.

Over the next few weeks, town clerks will receive a drop shipment of supplies—including three separate mailing envelopes — targeted at reaching 80% of the voting population.

Towns will not need to submit receipts to receive monetary support from the secretary of the state, who will also develop enhancements to the Connecticut Voter Registration System, which some town clerks said is antiquated and difficult to use.

Funds for postage and additional expenses, including laptops or help needed to process mailings, will come from the secretary of state’s office through federal grants, said Gabe Rosenberg, communications director for Secretary of The State Denise Merrill.
“We’re using our federal Cares ACT money to make sure that they have the resources that they need to fulfill the absentee ballot request that they get, because we know in advance it’s going to be a historic moment,” Rosenberg said.

Before the primary, Sec. Merrill contracted with an independent mailing house to send out absentee ballots, but informed town clerks on Aug. 3 that the responsibility would fall on them. A week ahead of the primary, 20,000 absentee ballots had still not been mailed to voters who requested them.

Early this week, town clerks learned they would be responsible for mailing absentee ballots ahead of the general election. Many said the added workload will pose significant challenges.

Newington town clerk James Krupienski said his office will be able to handle the additional volume with extra staffing if the secretary of state’s proposed software enhancements and funding comes through.

Krupienski, who is also a member of the Connecticut Town Clerks Association executive board, said the secretary of state’s action in terminating the mail-house contract just days before the primary was problematic for town clerks. “When you have something like that happen five days before the actual primary is going to take place, that can cause a large issue,” he said.

The workload leading up to the general election, Krupienski said, “is not going to be an easy process, don’t get me wrong. Thirty-one days to issue 11,000 ballots is a monumental challenge. But if we start seeing those applications back early, all those ballot packs can be prepared ahead of time, and the labels can be placed on to them.”

Senate Republican Leader Len Fasano (R-North Haven) has written to Gov. Lamont urging him to stop Sec. Merrill from sending absentee ballot applications to every voter and forcing town clerks to mail out actual ballots.

Fasano also said he supports expanding absentee ballot usage during the pandemic and pointed to its bipartisan approval in the special legislative session. But processing over 1 million absentee votes in the general election is “going to be a huge problem for these town clerks to deal with.”

“Rather than doing the whole thing and taking the blame, [the SOTS] wants to do the easy part by sending out applications, and let the town clerks deal with the shortcomings, which is the processing,” Fasano said. “If they fail, she’s good. If it works, she’s going to stand up and say, ‘see what I did.’ She’s ready to take the credit, but when things go wrong, it’s everybody’s fault.”

Michael Hamad can be reached at mhamad@courant.com.