

Legislature Must Restore Funds For Two Election Programs

BY CAROL REIMERS AND AND JANE EYES

Cuts that weaken the Citizens' Election program and State Elections Enforcement Commission under the current budget should be restored by the General Assembly when it returns to Hartford Feb. 7. These two programs, which allow more candidates to run for office and ensure election laws are followed are vital to Connecticut's political health.

Candidates from both major parties are lining up to run for governor in November with others vying for position in races for the open statewide offices of attorney general and treasurer. Interest is also high in other statewide and legislative offices whose occupants will play a key role in getting the state's fiscal problems under control. This growing interest in public service is encouraging and exciting for our political system. It is no time to give voters fewer choices and less confidence in the fair conduct of our elections.

The Citizens' Election Program, a nationally recognized program, provides public financing to qualified candidates for statewide offices and the legislature. Candidates must agree to abide by certain guidelines, including contribution and expenditure limits and disclosure requirements. The program helps put candidates on equal financial footing and helps to remove the fiscal impediment to running for office. Incumbents are seen to have an advantage in fund raising that makes it harder for challengers to mount an effective campaign.

Unfortunately, the Citizens' Election Program was attacked in the last approved budget even though it has proven to be successful. In past elections, approximately 75 percent of the candidates from both major political parties participated in the program. Provisions in the new budget tampered with the funding formula by: (1) raising the maximum contribution from \$100 to \$250 which favors incumbents who will be able to raise the basic required funds with less difficulty, putting challengers as well as candidates from less wealthy districts at a disadvantage. (2) The schedule was shortened to qualify for grants, which will hurt those who enter the race later in the process (primary challengers.)

In addition, the State Elections Enforcement Commission, which oversees the Citizens'

Election Program, has been hindered in its enforcement efforts. A new timeline established for the commission to respond to complaints creates an unreasonable situation given the cuts to staffing. Those accused of election violations will be able to run out the clock rather than comply with documentation requests. The commission already suffered severe budget cuts and staff reductions.

Not only is the League of Women Voters of Connecticut concerned about the limitations imposed in the last budget on campaign financing, we are deeply concerned about the method employed in making these changes. Inserting these items in the budget circumvented the legislative process. These new regulations were implemented without public scrutiny or opportunity for public comment. Because these new regulations were inserted in the budget outside of the legislative process, they are not well defined and there is little consensus on the details for fair and effective implementation.

The league has been a key supporter of the Citizens' Election Program since its inception in 2005 and has worked consistently to protect the campaign finance disclosure provisions. The league nationwide believes that campaign finance regulation should enhance political equality for all citizens, ensure transparency to protect representative democracy from distortion by big money, and combat corruption and undue influence in government. It should work so that all Americans can run for office, even if they are not wealthy or connected to wealthy special interests.

With the new group of candidates entering the political arena, the league wants them to be able to have the same opportunities afforded the current office holders when they were running a campaign. The General Assembly must repeal the newly adopted changes and restore the Citizens' Election Program and State Elections Enforcement Commission to being effective programs that provide campaign financing for elections that Connecticut citizens can feel confident are clean, fair and transparent.

Carol Reimers is president of the League of Women Voters of Connecticut. Jane Eyes is the league's vice president for public issues.