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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AND LEGAL AFFAIRS

Testimony of Shenna Bellows, Secretary of State
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Testifying in favor of

L.D. 1148 "An Act to Improve Access to Absentee Ballots for Municipal Elections for Uniformed Service Voters and Overseas Voters"

Senator Hickman, Representative Supica and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs, my name is Shenna Bellows, I live in Manchester, and I am the Secretary of State. I am testifying in favor of L.D. 1148 because the policy goal is one the State of Maine should aspire to.

Currently when uniformed service and overseas voters (commonly referred to as UOCAVA voters, from the Uniformed And Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act) request an absentee ballot, they receive the appropriate state ballots from the Division of Elections. State ballots for UOCAVA voters are sent to voters centrally from the Division of Elections, where they are also returned, processed and counted. UOCAVA voters include active-duty military and their dependents (U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps); Coast Guard; commissioned corps of the U.S. Public Health Service and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; the Merchant Marine; and any U.S. citizen living outside of the United States who was qualified or would be qualified to vote in their place of residence in Maine prior to leaving the United States.

Last November, about 6,600 UOCAVA voters participated in the General Election. As with any other voter, we see greater UOCAVA interest in presidential elections than other types of elections.

This bill would expand the program to allow for electronic return of the municipal ballot through a system similar to the one the state utilizes for all municipalities. We applaud the policy and note that there will be substantial implementation challenges that will require significant resources in order to implement with the proper safeguards to protect security and accessibility of our elections.

There is not currently a mechanism by which the Division of Elections can issue local ballots, as local elections are not overseen by the Department of the Secretary of State. This was raised as an issue recently when a Mainer studying abroad requested their ballot and was surprised not to receive their local ballot. It took some work, and the voter received their local ballot, but the issue had clearly been raised.

This issue is what L.D. 1148 seeks to address. Because each municipality having to procure separately the technology to issue local ballots timely and securely at the municipal level would create significant administrative and financial burdens on the municipalities, L.D. 1148 would have the Division of Elections issue a voter's local ballot for any municipal election for which the uniformed service voter or overseas voter is eligible that is to be held on the same date as a statewide election.

This would require three major investments to modernize our elections to ensure that we continue to have free, safe and secure elections at every level including 1.) technology; 2.) staffing and 3.) procedures.

Technology: The Division of Elections would be required to procure a new system that would accommodate not only state and federal elections but also all of the myriad municipal elections including school budget and school board elections. We have reached out to our current vendor to inquire as to a rough estimate of the cost but acknowledge that this would require a new Request for Proposal (RFP) process in accordance with state procurement rules and could be very costly.

Staffing: The Division of Elections anticipates that this would create significant additional staffing needs at the Division of Elections to train and coordinate timely ballot transmittal from the municipalities into the system. This would expand the current duties of the Division of Elections into municipal election oversight, as we would need to work with potentially up to 500 municipalities on proper ballot design and timely ballot submission. We anticipate that should the state take this on, many municipalities would likely change their election dates to coincide with state and federal elections. The Division of Elections is already working overtime in advance of state and federal elections, so we would propose creation of a new section to handle Municipal and Local Services to ensure that everything is performed legally, accurately, efficiently and securely.

Procedures: The Division of Elections would need to work closely with municipalities on proper procedures for ballot layout and transmittal because of course this proposal would necessitate the Division of Elections receiving these local ballots in time to issue to the UOCAVA voters (federal requirements are that UOCAVA ballots be issued 45 days prior to the election, for applications filed ahead of that date). Once any local ballots are voted and returned to the Division of Elections, they would be delivered to the municipality for counting. That too would require proper procedures and staffing.

We believe this is an important undertaking, though we acknowledge that it is no small task. Should the committee decide to move forward with this initiative, we stand ready to make it work with the proper resources.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this information, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.