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Department of the Secretary of State

Bureau of Corporations, Elections and Commissions

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Secretary of State

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February 1, 2025

The Honorable Craig Hickman, Senate Chair
Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs
100 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333-0100

The Honorable Laura Supica, House Chair
Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs
100 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333-0100

Dear Senator Hickman, Representative Supica and Members of the Committee,

Pursuant to Maine election law, Title 21-A section 675, requiring the Secretary of State to report “the number and type of reports of threats to or harassment of public officials received by the Secretary of State during the previous calendar year,” we are pleased to provide the following 2024 report.

We provide annual threat reporting training to clerks and provided two such trainings this year. Nevertheless, this section of law was not utilized by clerks to report threats in 2024. That being said, regular communications with clerks reveal that several clerks have experienced verbal harassment rising to the level of involvement with law enforcement and the issuance of protection orders. It is possible that this section of law as currently drafted is not adequately capturing what is happening regarding threats to critical infrastructure and election officials. Furthermore, clerks have expressed concerns about the privacy of threat reports to the Secretary of State under right to know laws.

Pursuant to our conversations with clerks, we have updates regarding the following incidents that involve threats or harassment of election officials in performance of their official duties:

- In one municipality, a resident of a municipality made false claims regarding their local clerk and repeatedly made intimidating posts regarding that clerk over the course of months for a period of time exceeding one year. Harassment rose to a level that the clerk’s family members asked her to avoid family functions. Prosecutors initiated legal proceedings that were then paused when the resident committed another alleged crime. The clerk was successful in obtaining a protection from harassment order against the resident, but both the clerk and local law enforcement expressed concern that their options to protect other municipal staff or municipal proceedings were limited. The clerk also noted that the resident utilized the Maine Freedom of Access Act to obtain documentation of the clerk reporting her concerns to authorities, which the resident then used to target the clerk online. The clerk must renew the protection from harassment order annually.

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- In one instance, a resident of a municipality made false claims regarding their local clerk and repeatedly made intimidating posts regarding that clerk. This resulted in the clerk obtaining a protection from harassment order against the resident.
- A clerk reports that a resident researched the clerk's prior career to make false allegations of partisanship based on the clerk's activities prior to municipal service. The resident repeatedly called on town officials to fire the clerk solely on the basis of prior political affiliation. The clerk acknowledged that this is not a threat under Title 21-A but noted that the level of vitriol caused great distress to her.
- In a fourth situation, a resident of the town is being prosecuted by the district attorney for violation of a no trespass order and protection of harassment order sought by municipal officials after a series of behaviors including stalking, verbal threats and brandishing a weapon over multiple years. The town has had significant turnover of municipal employees in part due to the harassment by the town resident.
- Finally, with regard to threats against myself as Maine's Chief Election Official, I have two updates to provide. In last year's report I detailed the doxing and swatting that targeted me in late December of 2023. For new members of this committee, it is important to know that I, members of my family and my colleagues at the Department were targeted with hundreds of threatening communications. In November, 2024, I was relieved to receive word, in the form of a victim impact notice, that the perpetrators of the swatting of my home had been identified and charged by federal prosecutors. In January I received subsequent notice that the initial status hearing for one of the defendants has been rescheduled by the court. I look forward to justice prevailing in this case, and perpetrators of threats against election workers being held accountable for their actions.

The Office of Secretary of State continues to prioritize trainings and security measures for clerks. The Office coordinated SAFE assessments for polling places in 2023 and 2024. A Security Assessment at First Entry (SAFE) assessment, is a stand-alone assessment, featuring standard language, high level vulnerabilities, and options for consideration. These reports are designed to assess current security posture and produce a report for the recipient. 46 SAFE assessments of clerks' offices and voting places were conducted by federal partners from CISA, in coordination with this Department, for 25 municipalities.

We conducted three physical security and de-escalation trainings for clerks prior to each election held in 2024. Trainings were organized in partnership with the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) and FBI.

We engaged in emergency and disaster response planning with support from CISA and our partners at Maine Emergency Management Agency. We organized the first-ever Maine-specific Table Top the Vote exercise for clerks with significant support and guidance including facilitation assistance from our partners CISA. The Federal Emergency Management Agency defines tabletop exercises as "discussion-based sessions in which key personnel assigned emergency management roles and responsibilities meet in an informal setting to discuss their roles during an emergency and their responses to a hypothetical, simulated emergency." The Maine tabletop exercise allowed election officials and clerks to explore a variety of potential real-life scenarios (including swatting) and what the appropriate responses would be to ensure continuity of operations and security of clerks and voters. We brought together clerks, law enforcement and our partners from CISA and MEMA for a nationwide Table Top the Vote exercise organized by CISA in August, 2024.

We organized three statewide briefings, one prior to each election in 2024, for law enforcement to facilitate their understanding of election laws at the polling places and promote close cooperation with clerks and wardens on Election Day.

All of this training paid off in many ways, most notably regarding swatting incidents that occurred on Election Day in November 2024. CISA defines swatting as “the criminal act of deceiving emergency services into sending heavily armed response teams to an unsuspecting victim's address by falsely reporting a serious emergency situation, such as a hostage situation, bomb threat, or active shooter.” More than a dozen schools statewide went into lockdown on Election Day following a wave of hoax communications about an alleged active shooter. Four of those schools – Deering High School in Portland, Scarborough High School, Sanford High School, Windham High School, Lewiston High School – were schools where voting was occurring on the school campus. At a fifth school, South Portland High School, voting was taking place at the adjacent community center. Because of excellent preparation and training as well as strong communications between election officials and law enforcement, disruption to voting was minimal in one polling place and completely uninterrupted at all other polling places.

Also on Election Day, after the polls closed while ballots were being counted, a shelter in place order was issued for Rumford due to an ongoing emergency involving an armed individual in the municipality pursuant to a domestic incident. The Office of Secretary of State deployed law enforcement to protect the polling place while counting was occurring and escort local election officials and ballots back to the municipal offices after counting was complete.

In 2024, the Elections Division instituted safe mail handling procedures and protocols after incidents in which suspicious mailings targeted election offices statewide in the fall of 2023. Note: some offices including in Washington State and Georgia received mail containing fentanyl. An increase in threatening mail addressed to me early in the year heightened concerns that we might be targeted in Maine. In September, 2024, I and other Secretaries of State around the country were the intended recipients of a white powder sent through the mail. The envelope was intercepted before it reached its intended destination, and we are grateful to postal employees and law enforcement for their efforts.

In conclusion, election security remains a high priority for my office. It is critically important that we continue to work closely together to ensure the continued safety and security of our municipal clerks, public officials, and election infrastructure more broadly. Training and preparation require resources, and we look forward to partnering with you to continue to protect Maine elections.

Sincerely,



Shenna Bellows
Secretary of State