

Plan eases state voter rules for victims of abuse



JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

Secretary of State William F. Galvin.

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As the presidential election approaches in November, Secretary of State William F. Galvin is pushing a proposal that would allow victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking to register to vote without making their

addresses public in voter rolls.

“They shouldn’t have to give up the right to vote to be safe,” Galvin said last Wednesday in a telephone interview. “We’ve had many inquiries, especially this year as the presidential elections have been ramping up.”

The plan, which is pending before state lawmakers, would make it illegal for election officials to disclose the names and addresses of voters who qualify for confidentiality. That information would also be kept out of street listings or annual registers, according to the legislation. Galvin, the state’s top election official, cosponsored the bill.

Some victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking move to escape their perpetrators and may not register to vote in their new homes because they worry that their abusers could learn their addresses through voting records, which are public, Galvin said.

“We shouldn’t live in a society where survivors of domestic and sexual violence are forced to avoid voting for their physical safety,” said Valenda Applegarth, a senior attorney and director of Relocation Counseling Project at Greater Boston Legal Services.

Though several officials in Massachusetts said Wednesday they could not think of any instance where an abuser found a victim’s new address through voter rolls, Galvin said his office has heard from residents who are concerned about that information becoming public.

Voters under the protection of a court order can already cast ballots privately, but Galvin said his proposal would extend that option to those enrolled in the state’s Address Confidentiality Program. More than 400 people are enrolled, he said.

The program, which was established in 2000 and run by Galvin's office, provides a confidential mail forwarding system for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking.

More than 35 states have programs that keep the addresses of victims of certain crimes out of public records, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Of those states, 30 have laws dealing specifically with voting and voting records, the organization said.

In 2014, laws in Massachusetts were amended to prohibit information about arrests and police responses to reports of domestic violence and sexual assault from being disclosed in public police logs.

Chelsea Police Chief Brian Kyes, president of the Massachusetts Major City Chiefs, said keeping such records private is a "great idea."

"In today's day and age of technology, if someone was inclined to locate someone who has been victimized, that is certainly an innovative way for a past abuser to jump on the Internet and look for those public records," he said.

Jane Doe Inc., a statewide coalition combatting sexual and domestic violence, also supports the plan, said spokeswoman Toni Troop.

"We can't see a downside," she said.

Galvin said he wants the bill to pass quickly so city and town election officials will have enough time to implement procedures to accommodate voters who want to keep their home addresses private. The deadline to register to vote in the presidential election is Oct. 19.

The provision was reviewed by a legislative committee on election laws and voted out favorably early last week. The bill is now being reviewed by the House Committee on Steering, Policy and Scheduling, Galvin said.

The Massachusetts Town Clerks Association, which represents officials who run elections in about 320 communities, is supportive of the plan, according to Andy Dowd, the group's president.

Dowd, who is the town clerk in Northborough, said he does not believe the proposal would be difficult to administer.

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