

Government Administration and Elections (GAE) Committee

Public Testimony of Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF)

S.B. 471: *An Act Concerning Elections and State Voting Rights*

Submitted by: Madeline Granato, Policy Director

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The Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF) is a statewide nonprofit that advocates for and empowers women and girls in Connecticut, especially those who are underserved or marginalized. For forty-eight years, CWEALF has been a leading advocate for policies that advance the economic security of women across our state and promote gender equity.

Through CWEALF's Legal Education Program, we provide information, education, referrals, and bilingual advocacy to the Connecticut community to ensure that all individuals in our state have access to legal justice. The majority of CWEALF's clients are low-income women with at least one dependent.

We urge the committee to support S.B. 471: *An Act Concerning Elections and State Voting Rights*.

The federal Voting Rights Act of 1965 was enacted to combat a wide range of barriers and burdens that exclude voters of color from the political process. In the decade since its passage, courts have invalidated one of the core provisions of the law and rendered it increasingly burdensome for voters of color to vindicate their rights. Today, the burden that litigation under the federal Voting Rights Act places on plaintiffs may prevent voters of color from bringing claims when their rights have been violated.

Connecticut has a history of voter suppression. Prior to the passage of the 15th amendment to the United States Constitution, Connecticut rejected amendments to strike the word "white" from qualifications of electors and we were also the first state in the country to enact - and eventually one of the last states to prohibit - a racially discriminatory literacy test for voting. Currently, voters of color in Connecticut routinely encounter long lines and other obstacles when voting, so much so that the Center for Public Integrity observed that voters in our state continue to "face some of the biggest obstacles outside of the south."

Senate Bill No. 471, or the Connecticut Voting Rights Act, takes several steps to improve voting rights in our state, including expanded assistance to voters who face language barriers and obstacles to casting their ballots and also the establishment of new private rights of action against voter suppression, intimidation, deception and obstruction. The Connecticut Voting Rights Act also presents an historic opportunity for Connecticut to build

on the success of other state Voting Rights Acts enacted in California, Washington and Oregon.

We urge the Committee to support S.B. 471 this session to begin to reverse decades of systematic voter suppression in our state and elevate Connecticut to a national leader in protecting the right to vote for communities of color.