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Commentary

Election system reform essential to Michigan

Ruth Johnson

As we work together to achieve better times for Michigan and build a strong foundation for our state's long-term success, we must take steps now to reform and improve our elections system.

With the support of partners at the state, local and national levels, I'm pleased to announce the Secure and Fair Elections Initiative, which includes an 11-bill legislative package, new Secretary of State policies and expanded use of technology.

In the area of campaign finance, we must require more accountability for candidates and committees. Under our plan, the worst offenders could face felony charges or forfeiture of funds.

To discourage attempts to deceive voters, like last year's fake Tea Party, more financial disclosure will be required.

In striving for secure elections, nothing is more important than the accuracy of our voter lists. The Pew Report on the States found in 2008 Michigan had 102.54 percent of its eligible voting population registered to vote. That just doesn't add up.

Some people on our state's Qualified Voter File aren't "qualified" at all — they're dead, they've moved out of state or they're not U.S. citizens. This year to date, we have removed the names of 30,000 deceased people from the voter rolls and we are confirming another 20,000.

More alarming are the thousands of noncitizens on our voter rolls. Prior to 2008, under federal law, nearly all driver's license applicants in Secretary of State branch offices were offered a voter registration application, regardless of citizenship. Today, we make it clear that applicants must be U.S. citizens.

Federal immigration and Social Security officials have refused or ignored our repeated requests for citizenship data, which only they possess, to assist us in ensuring accuracy in our voter lists. Our office is working with Congresswoman Candice Miller on measures that would require the federal government to provide that information.

As part of the SAFE Initiative, and with the assistance of Attorney General Bill Schuette's office, we have launched an Elections Crimes Unit that includes an election day-response team and hotline.

We will also close photo ID loopholes. In 2008, more than 2,800 people voted in our state without having to show photo ID at any time in the registration or elections process. We're also proposing "no-reason" absentee voting for convenience for voters. This will, however, be paired with the same, secure photo ID and affidavit rules now required at local voting precincts.

We'll also fight ACORN-style voter registration by asking organizations to register with the State's Bureau of Elections. We'll also provide training so voter registration drive workers know the law, preventing bogus voter registrations.

There is nothing more important to democracy, our Republic, than secure and fair elections. By passing this needed SAFE legislation and achieving reforms, we can strengthen Michigan's election system for this and future generations.

Ruth Johnson is the Michigan secretary of state. Email comments to letters@detnews.com.