

# Candidate Finances A Click Away

New State Website Streamlines Elections Filings, Will Offer Trove Of Data For Voters

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Finding out who donated money to state candidates for public office could soon be as easy as online shopping, state election officials said Thursday.

Leaders of the State Elections Enforcement Commission launched a new website, dubbed eCRIS, that they say will make it easier for candidates to file statements electronically and for the public to search campaign finance records.

"Today marks a milestone in the state's history of campaign finance reform," said Jeffrey Garfield, executive director of the commission. "Disclosure is meaningless if the information is not readily accessible, searchable, sortable and easily understood."

Candidates can already use the website, <http://seec.ct.gov/ecris>, to submit campaign finance records. The next filing deadline is Jan. 10. However, visitors will be unable to search the database until the rollout of the second phase of the project in April, Garfield said.

The effort is part of a major reform to campaign finance law passed in 2005.

All campaign finance filings will eventually be posted on the site, although in most cases the candidates themselves are not required to file electronically. State law only requires statewide candidates who raise more than \$250,000 to do so. The Elections Enforcement Commission has recommended lowering the mandatory threshold to \$10,000 for candidates and \$5,000 for political action committees, Garfield said. Advocates expect to see legislation this year that would include all state legislators, said Andy Sauer, executive director of Connecticut Common Cause, an independent government watchdog group.

Most state legislators raise far below the \$250,000 threshold, Sauer said. A legislator raises anywhere from \$4,000 to \$30,000 in a House race and \$10,000 to \$200,000 for the Senate, Sauer said.

The new site replaces an outdated electronic filing system that was used by only 3 percent to 5 percent of candidates. But with eCRIS, "We would expect it to be exponentially higher than that," Garfield said.

Regardless of whether candidates file electronically or on paper this year, the commission will enter all candidate finance reports into the system, Garfield said. The commission hopes to make information dating back to 2002 available on the new site.

By filing electronically, candidates save the state time and money. "It's going to cost money to have somebody input this, and it's not going to be insignificant," Sauer said.

Electronic campaign finance reports have been available since the 1990s, but eCRIS offers several features that were previously unavailable, including allowing users to upload and download data from software programs such as Microsoft Excel. The old system let users download data, but only as a PDF file. It was cumbersome, was limited in its search ability and often failed, Sauer said.

"Ultimately, the only way you could do it was to print it out and scan it by eye," Sauer said.

Now, because raw data will be available to the public, anyone will be able to search the information in a variety of ways, Sauer said.

Among the search options available on the website are candidate name, committee name, office sought and campaign treasurer. But by using raw data and financial software, other searches are possible, including by ZIP code or even employer, Sauer said.

The new electronic filing also makes entering information easier and has more safeguards, advocates say. When a treasurer enters contributions that are not allowed, for example, the website will immediately flag the contribution as noncompliant.

Scott Veley, Republican town chairman of Berlin, was one of about 100 people — legislators, treasurers, campaign finance reform advocates and others — who filled a meeting room Thursday at the state Legislative Office Building to watch a demonstration of the new system.

Veley said he would try the new system but would make sure to keep backup files.

"It looks pretty simple and easy as long as you're computer savvy," Veley said. "We're definitely going to be giving it a shot."

Terry Gerratana, an elections commission member and former state representative, said first-time users may be wary about electronic filing but said security and data backup for the system is among the most advanced available. For those who file electronically, the new system will be "paper-free," meaning a backup will only exist in electronic form.

Gerratana, who was the first state legislator to electronically file her campaign finance reports a decade ago and a beta user of the new program, said the reduction in paper files is a positive step for the environment. But even as one of the first people in the state to file a campaign report online, she recommends being careful to make copies of all paperwork.

"I always say, 'back up, back up, back up.'"

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