



**AARON AMMONS**  
**CHAMPAIGN COUNTY CLERK & RECORDER**

Champaign County, Illinois

---

1776 East Washington Street

Urbana, IL 61802

Office/Vitals: 217-384-3720   Taxes: 217-384-3722   Elections 217-384-3724   Recorder: 217-384-3774

[www.champaigncountyclerk.il.gov](http://www.champaigncountyclerk.il.gov)

Protecting Our Democracy's Frontline Workers"

Aaron Ammons

County Clerk & Recorder

Champaign County

7/1/22

To Chairman Durbin and the esteemed members of the Senate Judiciary Committee

My name is Aaron Ammons. I am a former Alderman from Urbana; IL and I now serve as the Champaign County Clerk in Central Illinois. Specifically, I am the Election Authority for Champaign County, one of 102 counties in the state of Illinois.

I am honored to share my testimony to this body about the culture of elections in my county post 2020. This committee being willing to hear from Election Authorities like County Clerks, and Election Commissioners is critical to understanding how elections work daily and from cycle to cycle. Your desire to hear from us directly, assures us that you want to further familiarize yourselves with the processes and procedures necessary to administer an election. We hope that will lead to Congress fully funding, securing, and making our elections more accessible, County by County. As one who believes 100% in participatory Democracy, there is no greater privilege and responsibility than to testify before this committee about the atmosphere surrounding the 2020 election and its subsequent impact on election officials, our staff, election judges, and the voters of America.

There are many misnomers and assumptions about election processes that have led to misinformation being spread across the country. Misinformation is commonplace and our offices are accustomed to responding to common misconceptions. However, dis-information is an intentional spreading of half-truths and in some cases, outrageous, baseless, lies. My colleagues and I are deeply concerned that disinformation will replace faith in our elections with unfounded skepticism and lead to more events like January 6, 2021.

The first thing that impacted my ability to administer the election in my County was the statement made during the 2020 election by former President Donald Trump. When former President Trump told the American people, during a global pandemic, that voting by mail (VBM) was not safe, I thought it was the ultimate betrayal of the trust of the American people, I thought it was treasonous! American soldiers from both sides of the aisle have been voting by mail since



**AARON AMMONS**  
**CHAMPAIGN COUNTY CLERK & RECORDER**

Champaign County, Illinois

---

1776 East Washington Street

Urbana, IL 61802

Office/Vitals: 217-384-3720 Taxes: 217-384-3722 Elections 217-384-3724 Recorder: 217-384-3774

[www.champaigncountyclerk.il.gov](http://www.champaigncountyclerk.il.gov)

the Civil War, Oregon has been voting by mail since the 80's, and millions of Americans have voted by mail safely and securely for decades.

In 2020 over thirty thousand (30,000) voters requested a VBM in my county. However, thousands of them, from both sides of the aisle, decided to surrender their VBM ballot and vote in person. These were voters who had requested and received their VBM in the mail, had their ballot in their hand, and still decided walk into a public place with lots of other people to vote in person. Many of them told me they were surrendering their VBM because they were either convinced, or alarmed enough, by what was being said by the President to ignore their initial desire to vote safely from home.

To this day, my staff and I are consistently faced with voters who have been exposed to dis-information about various aspects of voting by mail. They make statements about ballot harvesting, ballot boxes being stolen, mail carriers stealing ballots, ballots being thrown away, and how VBM is full of massive fraud. Even when I assure them that a Republican and Democratic election judge will have eyes on their ballot until it is cast into a tabulation machine, many of them are still adamant that VBM is fraudulent, and was the mechanism used by Democrats to steal the election from Donald Trump.

The Jan 6th attack on the Capital has also impacted my ability to administer elections in Champaign County. If American citizens will storm the Capital of this Nation, erect gallows, publicly express their intent to hang the Vice President of the United States and drag the Speaker of the House out by her hair, I think it's only responsible for me to be concerned about, and seek to prevent, a tragedy from happening in our polling locations. Men have walked into my office discretely videoing the layout of my office all while claiming to need a birth certificate, or Freedom of Information documents. I have received death threats against my daughter, numerous written communications espousing racist ideologies, and support for Donald Trump. Now we have voters walking into polling locations talking about Adolf Hitler, refusing to wear masks, and questioning whether their votes will be counted. One voter, a white male Republican, walked up to me at a polling location during our most recent primary election and asked me "are you trying to run a crooked election?" With the polarized nature of politics, mass shootings in public places, and the events of Jan 6<sup>th</sup>, many of our election judges are on high alert, stressed out, or feel like the climate is too hostile and volatile for them to serve.

Lack of necessary funding has also affected our ability to administer fair, free, and accessible elections post 2020. I'd like to share a comparison that illustrates my point. As you all know, the most recent National Defense budget was approved for \$782 BILLION dollars and there's a new request before Congress to increase that amount by \$31 BILLION, for a total of \$813 BILLION



**AARON AMMONS**  
**CHAMPAIGN COUNTY CLERK & RECORDER**

Champaign County, Illinois

---

1776 East Washington Street

Urbana, IL 61802

Office/Vitals: 217-384-3720 Taxes: 217-384-3722 Elections 217-384-3724 Recorder: 217-384-3774

[www.champaigncountyclerk.il.gov](http://www.champaigncountyclerk.il.gov)

dollars. At the same time, before members of Congress is an insufficient proposal for \$400 **Million** dollars to secure our elections and protect Democracy at home. When I share that information with other election administrators across the country, they ask rhetorically, is that just for our state? With great sadness and disbelief, I answer no, that's for the entire Country! I am sure that 90% of the 102 counties in Illinois need at least a million dollars to modernize and further secure our elections. The State of Illinois alone would use one-third of the proposed \$400 million if we were to receive an amount sufficient to our needs.

Ladies and gentlemen of this committee, my fellow Americans, budgets are moral documents, and they make plain the priorities of the people who create them, in this case it reflects the priorities of Congress and the President of the United States. Underfunding Election Officials and our offices contributes to the hostility and assaults against our profession and our electoral process. This must stop at every level of government, or our democracy will decay from the inside while it looks invincible from the outside.

As Election Officials, we have had to deal with an extremely polarized electorate, insufficient funding, understaffing, and we have also been working under the threat of violence. In April of 2020 I received a handwritten threat delivered to my office and my wife received two at her office. My wife, Carol Ammons, is the State Representative of the 103<sup>rd</sup> district, and the Chair of the Local Democratic party in Champaign County. All three handwritten letters stated if my wife accepted the position as Chair of the local Democratic Party our daughter "would die soon." Our daughter, Titianna Ammons, who had been recently diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis, commonly known as MS, was running to serve on our County Board. Despite the threats on her life, Titianna continued her campaign and was elected to the County Board and my wife assumed her post as Chair of the local party. That was a very uncertain time for us, and it forced us to change how we moved around the city and how we approached public events. While they didn't stop us from serving, the threats forced us to be on high alert, created additional stress to our lives, and prompted us to increase security measures at home and in public.

A recent legislative decision resulted in my office having to mail vote by mail applications to all registered voters in my County. Upon fulfilling my statutory responsibility, I received numerous applications back to the office with a wide variety of abusive comments, such as, "send this to your mother's house", "Fuck you Felon", "You people are idiots if you think this is going to work", "MAGA", and "I don't trust you nor vote by mail. Look at what we have as a President who is destroying our country because of voting by mail. Fraud caused a loss of good politicians."



**AARON AMMONS**  
**CHAMPAIGN COUNTY CLERK & RECORDER**

Champaign County, Illinois

---

1776 East Washington Street

Urbana, IL 61802

Office/Vitals: 217-384-3720 Taxes: 217-384-3722 Elections 217-384-3724 Recorder: 217-384-3774

[www.champaigncountyclerk.il.gov](http://www.champaigncountyclerk.il.gov)

Here's a response we received to an email my office sent to all registered voters. Note this email was sent just a few minutes before Christmas Eve.

**From:** JXN Warner <[jxnwarner@gmail.com](mailto:jxnwarner@gmail.com)>

**Sent:** Wednesday, December 23, 2020 11:42 PM

**To:** County Clerk Elections <[elections@co.champaign.il.us](mailto:elections@co.champaign.il.us)>

**Subject:** Re: Request Your Ballot Now!

**“surprised you niggers aint in prison by now filthy shitskin”**

When I think of how these threats and vile hate speech impact my staff, I'm reminded of two incidents. We've had at least two people come into the office videotaping the office and employees. The first person, a middle-aged white male, came in asking for a birth certificate and was secretly videotaping staff and panning his camera to get the layout of the office. This made the staff, in particular the women who sit up front, very uncomfortable. I was called to the front counter to speak with the gentlemen who assured me he was simply trying to get a birth certificate. After a few minutes of conversation, he decided to leave.

The second person, another white male probably 30-35 years old, came in with a camera strapped to his body asking for FOIA documents. That situation prompted my Chief of Staff, who's not easily rattled, to engage the man. After watching the video, I could see that she was unnerved by the strapped-on camera and his odd way of requesting a document. One of the other women in the office was shaken by his presence because as she said, "I thought it might have been a bomb or something."

While many will brush these incidents aside, I cannot. The violence we've witnessed from those in our society who believe they will be replaced, I, nor my staff, have the luxury of assuming these interactions are benign. We all just experienced yet another mass killing and this time there's a twisted irony. A U.S. citizen opened fire on other American citizens while they enjoyed the parade to celebrate the birth of the nation!

The threat to kill my daughter has been difficult to process, partly because the source of the threat has not been identified. In my opinion the source of these threats is the unchecked rhetoric of former President Donald Trump. Ever since his 2016 run for President where he began inciting violence at his rallies, encouraging people to punch protesters, stoked the flames



**AARON AMMONS**  
**CHAMPAIGN COUNTY CLERK & RECORDER**

Champaign County, Illinois

---

1776 East Washington Street

Urbana, IL 61802

Office/Vitals: 217-384-3720   Taxes: 217-384-3722   Elections 217-384-3724   Recorder: 217-384-3774

[www.champaigncountyclerk.il.gov](http://www.champaigncountyclerk.il.gov)

that led to the hostile, disrespectful, and dangerous language used today. Although we reported the incidents and threats, we were not satisfied with the response. Our local Sheriff's department took the lead on investigating the threats. However, a new investigator who had just recently been placed in investigations was assigned to the case. Although he was responsive and conducted several interviews of people we thought might be suspects, nothing helpful was discovered. There was an attempt to retrieve fingerprints from the letters and envelopes, but we were told that process didn't reveal any new information and that in Illinois we no longer have access to handwriting experts.

The concerning activities mentioned above have led to more locked doors in our office to prevent the public from being able to access employee work areas, as well as new security cameras in the office and at our facility where voting equipment is stored. We have shared code words with our judges in case of an emergency and we've implemented walkie talkies to communicate quickly. I have also decided to keep in place the glass barriers that were installed due to the pandemic. If I could, I would have metal detectors placed at the entrance(s) of our office building and I would have an elections building built specifically for the County Clerk's staff, elections equipment, and for voting.

Part of the reason why I would have a more secure building built specifically for elections is to make this work more attractive and convey the level of importance of what we do by having a secure facility. The threats, uncertainty, and lack of appreciation is causing my colleagues from all over the state and country to leave this profession leaving people in place with little to no experience in running an election. This is not good for our democracy. This job is already very stressful during the election cycle and now a job that's way underfunded compared to its importance, is now laced with hatred, threats, and security concerns that didn't exist prior to 2020. I have had more turnover in my elections division in four years than the election division has seen in the last 20 years. Getting people who are intrigued and understand the magnitude of elections is difficult enough and now having to share with them the safety concerns and unprecedented scrutiny, all for \$15 dollars an hour, is extremely challenging.

It's bad enough being scrutinized and accused of outlandish acts by voters who don't understand the process, but now we receive more requests for poll watching credentials than ever before. In particular, the State Republican party has asked for hundreds of credentials since 2020 compared to nominal amounts in years past. Many of the poll watchers are more aggressive, demanding, far more suspicious, and often unwilling to accept accurate answers about the electoral process. When confronted with the reality of how things work, many of them



**AARON AMMONS**  
**CHAMPAIGN COUNTY CLERK & RECORDER**

Champaign County, Illinois

---

1776 East Washington Street

Urbana, IL 61802

Office/Vitals: 217-384-3720   Taxes: 217-384-3722   Elections 217-384-3724   Recorder: 217-384-3774

[www.champaigncountyclerk.il.gov](http://www.champaigncountyclerk.il.gov)

disregard our answers and continue repeating talking points about how vote by mail is ripe with fraud. Poll watchers and observers come to challenge the process as opposed to documenting the process. We welcome eyes on the process, and we're open to suggestions but what we are receiving far too often is hostility that stems from dis-information.

The local Republican Party sued me, as the Election Authority for Champaign County, because I processed and cast vote by mail ballots according to Illinois election law. They asked the judge to prevent me from processing and casting legitimate VBM ballots according to the process outlined in Statute. They lost. Members of the local Republican Party call the State Board of Elections for every small issue that may occur in any Clerk's office and Republican County Board members routinely request my presence at their meetings to make wild accusations about election procedures. One of them, County Board member Jim Goss publicly referred to me as "the most incompetent and unqualified Clerk ever." It's important to note that none of them have taken the time to come visit the office, learn the procedures, or get answers directly from my office. These are elected officials who took an oath to uphold the laws and constitution of Illinois and the United States, yet they misuse taxpayer dollars to file frivolous lawsuits hoping Republican judges will put Party before the people, and the law, and they use their platform as elected officials to spread obvious lies about the process in Champaign County.

Because of the unfounded claims made by former President Trump and other Republicans at the Congressional, State, and local level, average citizens now call into question some of the simplest procedures. For example, they ask how do I know my vote was counted? On the surface this may seem like a simple and legitimate question, however, the truth is, they've never known. County Clerk's don't have the ability to show every single voter exactly when their vote was counted inside the software program because when their ballot is placed into a tabulator it's not connected to a particular voter. If we knew exactly when a voter's specific ballot was cast, then we would know exactly who they voted for and nullify their right to privacy.

Voters are now suspicious of the process because of the dis-information and intentional misleading of the American people by former President Donald Trump and other elected officials who trumpet his message. We are receiving FOIA requests from fringe "watchdog groups", form letter types of requests that are designed to keep our office from focusing on the election or other office duties. We have had to add FOIA updates into our weekly Admin meeting to stay on top of any new requests because of the frequency. The gentlemen I mentioned above who came to my office with a camera strapped to his body was allegedly there looking for FOIA documents.



**AARON AMMONS**  
**CHAMPAIGN COUNTY CLERK & RECORDER**

Champaign County, Illinois

---

1776 East Washington Street

Urbana, IL 61802

Office/Vitals: 217-384-3720 Taxes: 217-384-3722 Elections 217-384-3724 Recorder: 217-384-3774

[www.champaigncountyclerk.il.gov](http://www.champaigncountyclerk.il.gov)

My colleagues and I hope that our testimonies will be enlightening and spur you to action. Our contributions to preserving democracy domestically is the bedrock of America. Voting for the candidate(s) of our choice is what separates America from other forms of Government and we need our tax dollars to be directed towards modernizing our elections. We need long term solutions that will require far more of a commitment than \$400 million dollars for the entire country.

As I close my written testimony, please find below a list of concerns:

1. Security for election judges and staff. Most polling locations have easy access for voters, which also makes it very easy for people wishing to do harm to election workers.
2. Lack of funds to purchase the type of modern equipment and afford the maintenance agreements we need to run fair, free, and accessible elections. For example, **when I took office in 2018, I inherited tabulation machines that were no longer manufactured**, laptops (poll books) were running on Windows 7 and had not been supported by Microsoft for years, voter assisted terminals that worked so infrequently that some election judges refused to try to use them, **and the election management system that was being run on Windows XP.**
3. We need electronic poll books to update who has voted in real time. This is necessary to help prevent attempts to vote twice in the same election.
4. As vote by mail grows across the country, most Counties will need mail sorting machines, mail opener machines, drop boxes, etc... and right now they are not prepared for a large influx of vote by mail ballots.
5. Proper vendor support (vendors are also losing people but they also need more oversight/regulation). Once they are hired, the only recourse for a bad or incompetent vendor is a lawsuit. That doesn't help an election administrator and a County during the most polarized electorate in years.
6. Legislators all over the country need to work closer with County Clerk Associations so they can be educated about how we run elections. Many have ideas and concerns about elections so they pass laws that they think will help voters, but the truth is 95% of lawmakers at the Federal, State, and local level have NO idea



**AARON AMMONS**  
**CHAMPAIGN COUNTY CLERK & RECORDER**

Champaign County, Illinois

---

1776 East Washington Street

Urbana, IL 61802

Office/Vitals: 217-384-3720 Taxes: 217-384-3722 Elections 217-384-3724 Recorder: 217-384-3774

[www.champaigncountyclerk.il.gov](http://www.champaigncountyclerk.il.gov)

how to run an election. Running a campaign is nothing like running a fair, free, and accessible election.

7. Rogue election judges who will ignore their training and try to implement at polling locations, their own version of what the voting process should be. For example, in Illinois voters do not have to show ID when they vote unless they are a first-time voter, or they've been placed on an inactive status list. There was a Republican election judge who took it upon himself to make voters show their ID before they voted, and the other judges reluctantly went along with it until we were notified by a voter and resolved the issue.

In closing, the County Clerk and Recorder's Association in Illinois, and most likely all over the country, is not at the table when legislators are deciding what bills to carry, or laws to pass pertaining to elections. There needs to be a bi-partisan committee of Clerk's and Election Commissioners from small, medium, and large counties across American, who are called upon to offer insight to potential legislation pertaining to election operations and administration.

Finally, let me reiterate how honored I am to have an opportunity to share with this committee on such an important topic during this critical time in our Nation's history. I look forward to seeing what comes of this testimony and others as we work collectively to secure our democracy by maintaining and sustaining fair, free, and accessible elections.

In Service to the People,

Champaign County Clerk & Recorder

Aaron Ammons