

Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose
FY2026-2027 Operating Budget Testimony

April 2, 2025

Chairman Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Ohio Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on our office's budget request for the upcoming biennium.

As Secretary of State, my mission is to help every Ohioan pursue the American dream of participating in our democracy and building a business. I'm happy to report that we've thus far been successful, but our job isn't finished. As we began 2024, my office and the 88 county boards of elections began preparing for our "Super Bowl" -- the presidential general election. In anticipation of a high turnout election, my team held numerous "Ready for November" training seminars with county elections officials. We provided new tools and resources to ensure layers of redundant security. Administrative protocols were planned and practiced, and new poll workers were recruited, ensuring the democratic process would not be disrupted. Additionally, the General Assembly approved a \$1 million public service announcement campaign to educate voters on important election dates and deadlines, inform them of voter ID requirements, and communicate information about the security of Ohio's elections. Finally, I issued the fifth Security Directive of my administration to the county boards of elections to ensure both cyber and physical security measures were implemented across the state and coordinated with the Ohio Association of Election Officials to conduct an informational seminar for members of the General Assembly.

"Sweat in training so you don't bleed in battle" is a lesson I adopted from my military service. It has become a mantra for our office. We are responsible for a critical mission. Our elections must be transparent, accurate, secure, and efficient. The results of our tireless preparation for the 2024 election were on full display from the beginning of early voting to the close of polls. Unlike other states that were still counting ballots days and weeks after the election, Ohioans knew the unofficial results shortly after the polls closed. This was accomplished even with 5.8 million Ohioans turning out to make their voices heard at the ballot box, which is the second-highest turnout in our state's history.

In addition to the successful administration of Ohio's elections, my office continues to ensure Ohio is the most affordable state in the Midwest to start and grow a business. In 2024, over 172,000 new businesses filed in our state, demonstrating the strength and

resilience of our business climate. We have also been a national leader in leveraging our cybersecurity and fraud protection expertise from the elections side of our operations to better support and protect Ohio businesses, their owners, customers and their employees from those threats. In conjunction with many partners across the state, my office held “Are you Cyber Safe” events across Ohio. There, business owners heard from leading cybersecurity experts and learned best practices to stay safe from cyberattacks.

Our Priorities

Even as we maintain our fiscally conservative approach, my office has an ambitious agenda, one that’s critical to the integrity of our elections and the growth of our economy. I’m honored to say that many of our initiatives are already included in Governor Mike DeWine’s proposed budget, and I’d like to briefly address some of our top priorities.

Investing in Cybersecurity and Election Infrastructure

My office has been a pioneer in helping county boards of elections build a strong cybersecurity foundation that can also benefit other units of local government. We’ve focused on helping our board of elections evaluate and understand the threat landscape, strengthen their security requirements, modernize their cybersecurity capabilities, and establish strict vendor standards.

This collective defense of our critical infrastructure is not a “one and done” effort. It requires constant vigilance and adjustment to adapt to bad actors who work quickly to identify and exploit new vulnerabilities. We know our efforts are working, and I welcome Governor DeWine’s additional focus on securing and sustaining the statewide protection of critical infrastructure. By strengthening our collective defense and recovery planning, we’re preparing Ohio’s communities for when, not if, an attack happens. My team actively shares our intelligence reports, our challenges, and our successes with local, state, and federal partners, because we’re stronger together.

In the past, my office has utilized federal grant funding to build this foundation, but the reality is that, while the threats continue to grow and become more complex, these funding streams are shrinking. The cash balance in the office’s grant fund will effectively be at zero by the end of FY2025.

I’m honored to say that a portion of our request for GRF to support our cybersecurity initiatives is included in Governor Mike DeWine’s proposed budget. Most of these funds

directly support the counties you represent through grants for technology and IT support needed to operate and sustain a sophisticated cybersecurity program. As their state partner, we help leverage resources, share best practices, and secure cost-effective solutions. We estimate that our spending power has saved counties millions compared to purchasing these on their own.

Historically, our office has relied on business filing fees to fund most of its operations. Ohio's filing fees have remained static for at least a decade, while the operational cost of servicing our election and business infrastructure has increased due to the above-mentioned realities. Additionally, in FY 2020-2021, my office willingly returned more than \$1M in state GRF to support the administration's efforts. In the following biennium, GRF funding was further reduced by \$860,000. We've been fiscally responsible state partners, and our conservative approach will continue. But maintaining sound stewardship can be balanced with responsible investments in strong security. Increasing my office's state GRF to our original request is essential for cybersecurity protection and support, that will not only ensure Ohio maintains its strong security posture but also directly benefits local communities that may not have the resources to otherwise protect themselves.

Keeping Vulnerable Voters Safe at Home

Also included in the governor's budget request is an expansion of the Safe at Home program by increasing the appropriation authority from the current level of \$200k to \$375k in FY2026 and to \$400k in FY2027. These funds, supported by revenue collected from business filing fees and certain fines collected by courts, will permit my office to hire additional staff to serve the victims of domestic violence, sexual battery, human trafficking, rape, or menacing by stalking by precluding their personal addresses from public record. This allows these victims to receive mail, buy a house, and participate in elections without fear of their abuser finding them by searching for their voter registration or other public governmental information.

In addition to the increase in appropriation authority, I also support any efforts the General Assembly may take to expand the eligibility of the Safe at Home program. By having the ability to expand the infrastructure of this important initiative, my office could support the efforts of protecting more victims who are in desperate need for acceptance into this program.

Ensuring Voter Confidence

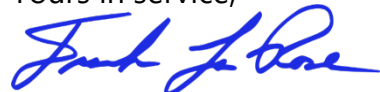
Finally, this budget continues a landmark modernization of Ohio's voter registration system to standardize data and ensure consistent reporting. It also continues to enhance the work of our Public Integrity Division to improve the investigation of election crime, modernize the reporting of campaign finances, certify the security of Ohio's voting systems, and assist businesses victimized by fraud and identity theft.

Conclusion

These are just a few of our most urgent priorities in the upcoming biennium. I want to thank the members of this General Assembly for your continued partnership in helping Ohioans build a business and participate in elections. You have truly allowed us to make our state the gold standard and a leader in that important mission. As the Senate awaits receipt of the operating budget from the House, please know that my office and I stand ready to assist this committee and to answer any questions you may have with the contents of the House version of the budget.

Thank you, Chairman Cirino and members of the committee, for allowing me to testify on behalf of the Office of the Ohio Secretary of State. I look forward to answering any questions you may have about our budget request.

Yours in service,



Frank LaRose

Ohio Secretary of State