

WEC: Rules about offering incentives to voters

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MADISON, WI – The Wisconsin Elections Commission reminds residents that it is illegal to give discounts, incentives and other free stuff in exchange for voting.

“Every election, well-meaning businesses or groups offer discounts or free food and drinks to people who come into their establishment with an I Voted sticker,” said Meagan Wolfe, Wisconsin’s chief election official. “However, that is against the law.”

According to state law against election bribery, it is illegal to offer someone an item worth more than \$1.00 to induce a person to vote, not vote, vote for a particular candidate, not vote for a particular candidate, or vote a specific way in a referendum.

Wolfe also cautioned groups and individuals not to approach voters who are waiting in line at the polling place with offers of free food and drink.

“Voters who are waiting in line should be left alone,” Wolfe said. “No one except an official greeter or line manager should be interacting with voters as they are in line. This includes members of the news media. Voters who are leaving the polling place may be approached for interviews by exit pollsters and others, but they must not cause a disruption and voters are under no obligation to speak with them.”

If groups or individuals wish to give away food or refreshments near polling places or clerks’ offices during in-person absentee voting, there are several things to

consider. Any table or stand must not block or impede voters' access to the polling place. Any items being given away must be available to everyone whether they have voted or not. Items given away cannot be in exchange for voting or not voting at the location. And there can be no electioneering – political signs, apparel, paraphernalia, or discussion – if the activity is happening within 100 feet of the entrance to the polling place.

Wolfe noted that Wisconsin's election bribery law specifically exempts people providing rides to the polls. The law says it "does not prohibit any person from using his or her own vehicle to transport electors to or from the polls without charge."

It is also common for groups or businesses to offer or deliver free food to poll workers. Election officials and municipal employees should carefully consider whether to accept things that may seem otherwise innocuous, such as free meals or meal reimbursements, while serving in an official capacity. This type of activity could violate county or municipal ethics codes, or at a minimum, it creates potential issues related to the perception of neutrality and objectivity.