

A Better Mt. Pleasant: Village clerk threatens indefinitely confined voters in Mount Pleasant

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“In defiance of state guidance, Village Clerk Stephanie Kohlhagen threatens voters with fines and jail in an astounding act of voter intimidation.”

MOUNT PLEASANT, WI SEPTEMBER 15, 2021 – On September 1, 2021, more than 1500 registered voters in the Village of Mount Pleasant received a letter from Village Clerk, Stephanie Kohlhagen, demanding that they recertify as being indefinitely confined absentee voters within thirty days, or risk being removed from the indefinitely confined absentee voter list.

Kohlhagen’s statements in her letter directly violated Wisconsin Election Commission’s Jan. 8, 2021 guidance to all Wisconsin clerks which explicitly stated “if a voter does not respond to your communication, you may not deactivate their absentee request if they returned their November 3, 2020 ballot.” It did not inform the voter that if they do not respond, no changes will be made – instead, it indicated exactly the opposite.

Kohlhagen’s letter also stated, in bold print, that anyone making a false statement risked up to six months imprisonment and a \$1000 fine, and erroneously told voters in her letter that “a voter who is unwilling or unable to go to the polls...SHOULD NOT choose indefinitely confined.”

“In my years as a voter engagement advocate, I have never seen such a blatant act of intimidation by a local clerk,” said A Better Mt. Pleasant spokesperson, Kelly Gallaher. “Clerk Kohlhagen’s disregard for the rights of voters in the community she serves is shocking and worthy of immediate investigation. She literally did the opposite of what she was told.”

Upon learning of the letter, A Better Mt. Pleasant contacted the village to confirm that all voters on the indefinitely confined absentee list were sent the same letter, and consulted the Wisconsin Election Commission (WEC) for the guidance and templates provided to Wisconsin clerks to assist them in updating their absentee voter lists.

The WEC gave clerks a template letter which stated that ‘identifying as an indefinitely confined voter is an individual choice based on your current situation and does not require you to be permanently confined.’ And that “if you do not respond to this mailing, no changes will be made to your absentee ballot request and you will continue to receive your ballots by mail.”

A Better Mt. Pleasant contacted Wisconsin Election Protection and requested their assistance in bringing this issue to the Wisconsin Election Commission for review. On September 14, 2021, we were informed that the WEC had contacted Stephanie Kohlhagen who told them she would not remove voters from the indefinitely confined list as indicated in her letter.

“Over a thousand voters were intimidated under threat of legal action for lawfully requesting to receive their ballots by mail. At this time, they do not know that the communication they received from their village clerk was aggressively improper,” said Gallaher. “In a time of a global pandemic, voters who populate the majority of indefinitely confined absentee requests are among our most vulnerable. Stephanie Kohlhagen didn’t make a mistake, she acted in opposition to what she was told by the state, against people, who in spite of their circumstance, wish to exercise their right to vote without fear or intimidation.”

A Better Mt. Pleasant calls for a full investigation into the actions of Stephanie Kohlhagen and the Village of Mt. Pleasant.