

Macomb clerk drives across state to highlight college students' difficulties voting in home district

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Macomb County Clerk Carmella Sabaugh dramatized a brewing controversy over student voting restrictions on Tuesday by driving 170 miles to assist a Warren woman with her absentee ballot.

Sabaugh took a trip to Grand Valley State University, near Grand Rapids, to assist student Krysta Kornack with her attempt to cast an absentee ballot in Warren.

At issue is an informal opinion issued by the Attorney General's Office that says municipal clerks must strictly ad-

here to a 1994 election law that says first-time voters who register by mail must vote in person at the polls. That requires the display of a photo ID.



SABAUGH

"I hope to dramatize this a little bit. This shows how this young woman from Warren would have to drive all the way back home to vote," Sabaugh said. "If you are up at school and have classes on

Election Day, you're not going to be able to make that trip."

Across the state, a bipartisan group of 65 of Michigan's 83 county clerks have created a "cross deputization" agreement under which they verify the identification of local college students so they can vote by absentee ballot in their hometown. Michigan Secretary of State Terri Lynn Land has also established similar assistance to first-time voters at secretary of state branch offices.

But Attorney General Mike Cox has determined that the process illegally circumvents Michigan election law, which restricts voting by people who register

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for the first time by mail. Cox's staff has concluded that the 1994 legislation, adopted by big bipartisan majorities in the Legislature, was an anti-fraud measure designed to require proof of identity when a first vote is cast.

John Selleck, a Cox spokesman, said the cooperative approach taken by county clerks

even violates the 2000 U.S. Supreme Court decision that decided the controversy over the Florida recount in the case of Bush v. Gore. That ruling requires uniformity in election rules, but not all Michigan county clerks are participating in the process of deputizing each other to confirm voter IDs.

"If you have two kids sitting in a dorm room, one is from Mount Clemens and one is from Pontiac, the kid from Mount Clemens can (vote by absentee ballot) and the kid from Pontiac cannot," Selleck said.

The issue has divided the state's two top Republicans — Cox and Secretary of State Terri Lynn Land. Land's branch offices are verifying first-time voter IDs and assuring those voters that they have complied with the system and are entitled to an absentee ballot.

Sabaugh, a Warren Democrat

seeking re-election on Tuesday, said she views the entire episode as a Republican attempt to restrict voting rights.

Sabaugh took Kornack to her local secretary of state's office and walked her through the process of verifying her identity and applying for an absentee application to vote in Warren. The county clerk then did the same for Jeanne Oxendine of Sterling Heights, who attends Hope College in Holland.

The Attorney General's Office said they have no idea how many absentee ballots have been cast through the cross-deputization program and Cox has no plan to legally challenge those votes after the Nov. 4 election.

College students still have time to request an absentee ballot from their hometown clerk. By law, the clerks must accept all absentee applications through Saturday at 2 p.m. With the clerk's program under scrutiny, Sabaugh recommended that students verify their ID with Land's department.

"They should play it safe and go to their local secretary of state's office," she said.