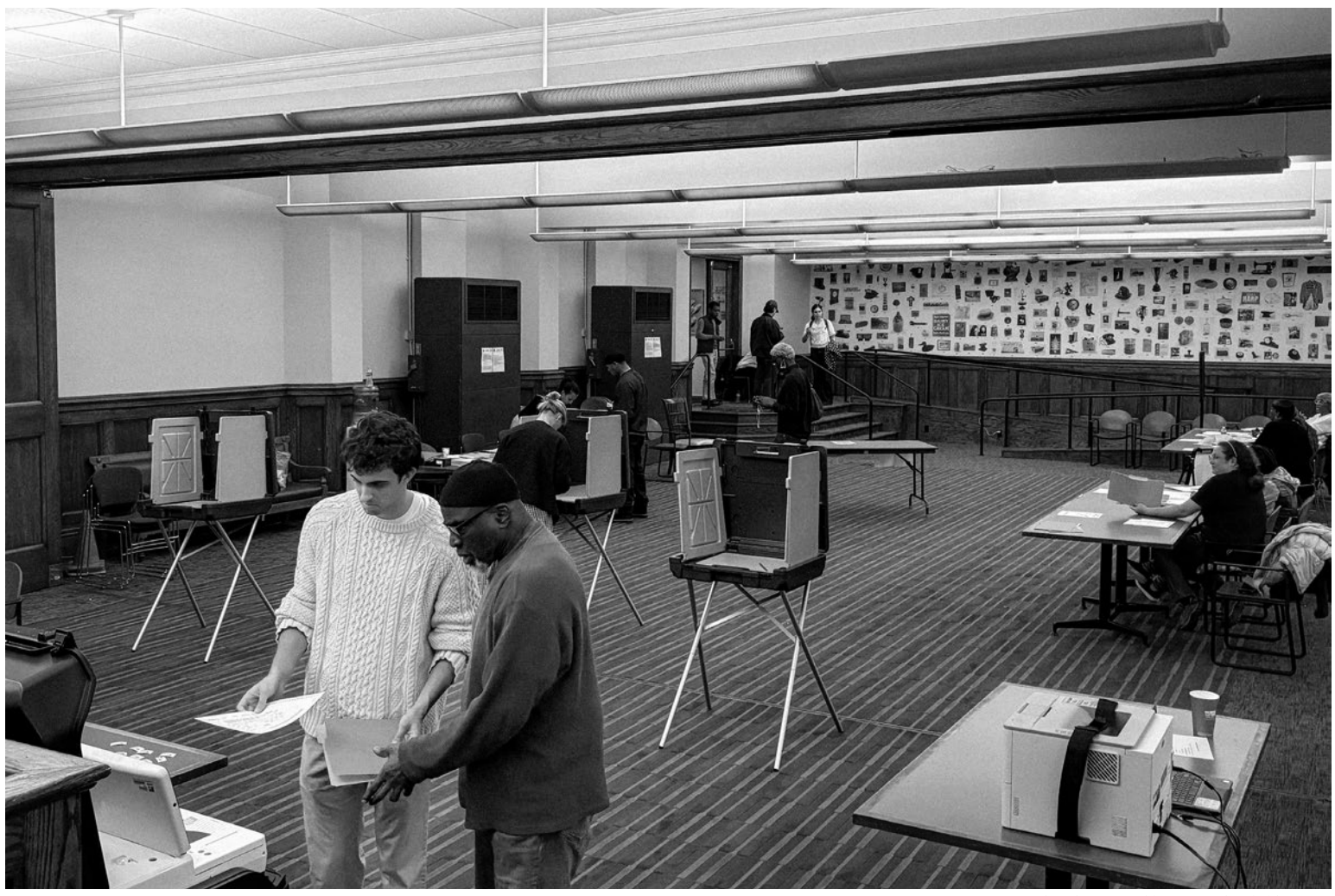
NEWS

"She was a lipstick boy / She was a beautiful boy"
BORN SLIPPY UNDERWORLD

Federal monitors loom on election day but give polling sites wide berth

BY EVELYN RONAN
STAFF REPORTER



CYRUS TURNER / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER
The Department of Justice announced Friday that it would dispatch monitors to New Haven but not any other Connecticut municipality. Despite concerns from local attorneys and activists, some elected officials reported no voter intimidation on Tuesday.

Despite concerns from city officials and local activists that the presence of federal election monitors would impact voter turnout in Tuesday's midterm elections, Department of Justice observers remained on the sidelines and did not impede voting.

The department last week announced plans to send election monitors to New Haven polling locations. According to state law, nonvoters must stay 75 feet from the doors of polling locations and monitors do not have the power to arrest people at the polls. Voters and election moderators across New Haven said on Tuesday that monitors they encountered complied with those regulations and did not interfere with voters as they cast their ballots.

Justice Department election monitors visited Benjamin Jepson Magnet School, Ward 13's polling location, around 9 a.m. on Tuesday and stayed for roughly 45 minutes, according to Ward 13 Alder Mildred Melendez.

Melendez said monitors maintained the required 75-foot distance, were "super nice" and did not deter voters from casting ballots. She said monitors asked voters about the availability of ballots in Spanish and polling place accessibility.

Outside the Ward 26 polling place at the Davis Academy for Arts and Design Innovation this morning, Justice Department monitor Zachary Denver asked voters questions, according to Ward 26 Alder Amy Marx LAW '00 and Democratic Ward Co-Chair Laura Cahn.

Marx said the questions Denver asked were "general," according to voters, and covered their voting experience, whether the site had signs in multiple languages and whether they felt free to vote for whomever they wanted.

Ward 7 Alder Christine Kim '99 said that around 3:40 p.m., an election monitor with a clipboard — the same person who was monitoring voters at the Jepson school — stopped by and asked questions about accessibility at the Hall of Records voting site.

Derek Miller, a Ward 18 Democratic Town Committee Co-chair, said he had not seen any Department of Justice election monitors at his polling location and hadn't heard of them intimidating voters or impeding Election Day processes.

President Donald Trump has sought to expand federal control over elections, according to reporting from ProPublica. His administration has demanded that states turn over their voter rolls, and Trump in March issued an executive order asking the U.S. Postal Service to create new regulations for mail-in voting.

Chris Ozyck, a Ward 13 Democratic Town Committee co-chair, said he was watching for monitors who asked voters for personal information like email addresses or phone numbers.

While most election-goers said the monitors did not impact voters negatively, Chris Mattei, an attorney who is at the helm of New Haven's legal defense against the Trump administration's lawsuit over the city's immigration policy, joined a host of Democrats at the Jepson School today for a press conference, where he accused the Justice Department of using monitors to "provoke" voters and delegitimize election results.

Monitors were welcomed openly into New Haven, and the city's commitment to fair elections was in full view, Mattei said in a video interview with the New Haven Independent. He added that election monitors in past administrations have been deployed to reinforce voter protections, though he finds it "hard to believe" that the federal government's intentions were based on making voting more accessible this time around.

Maggie Salem Mitchell, the executive director of Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services, a New Haven-based nonprofit, said in a Monday night phone interview that she was "particularly concerned" about language-assisted polling places being targeted by monitors and that the 75-foot radius requirement would do little to protect at-risk voters.

Mitchell attributed the deployment of election monitors to New Haven's "welcoming city" order, which prevents city employees from inquiring about or investigating immigration status unless required by state or federal law, and Mayor Justin Elicker's staunch opposition to the federal government's Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids.

"New Haven is on the federal government's naughty list," Mitchell said.

Tuesday's election marked the first time that the Justice Department dispatched election monitors to all 50 states.

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New Haven library staffing concerns revamp calls for more funding

BY JAMES EWART
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Longstanding concerns about the New Haven Free Public Library's city funding, which employees have said is not sufficient to maintain staffing and other library services, prompted a renewed push to demand more money from the Board of Alders.

During the public comment portion of a Sept. 21 alder meeting, Library Technical Assistant Kenzie Morrison said that a declining number of staff in the library system negatively impacts morale and has strained the library's ability to support vulnerable community members. Lauren Anderson '99, a former chair of the system, said the library has not opened on Sundays since 2000 or 2001, when it employed 74 staff members. Today, the library has a staff of 49, she said.

"We are not providing comparable salaries for those people so that they can commit long term to our library system and not be justifiably wooed away," Anderson said in a phone interview.

Despite those challenges, however, Morrison highlighted how the library system's five branches have continued to be key community centers in New Haven.

"Amidst all of that struggle, we ran 214 programs in a month, and one-on-one assistance and outreach events. Imagine what we could do fully funded. Imagine what we could do fully staffed," Morrison said in her testimony to the Board of Alders.

NHFPL branches provide internet access, offer programs including naturalization classes and serve as warming shelters in the winter. According to a fiscal year 2024 report from the library system, 2,700 programs were offered across branches that year.

The system's budget that year consisted of $5.8 million, or 0.79 percent of the city's operating funds. According to a statistical report on Connecticut's public libraries, the statewide average budget proportion allocated to library systems that year was 1.18 percent, significantly above New Haven's proportion. In fiscal years 2025 and 2026, the library received around 0.79 and 0.78 percent of the city's budget, respectively. In fiscal year 2027, the current fiscal year, the city allocated 0.75 percent of its budget to the library.

"Community needs are evolving and with that we see an increase in visitors who need social services resources," the system's Public Service Administrator Rory Martorana wrote in an email to the News. "The library works closely with the city's Community Services Administration and other community service organizations to connect folks with skilled specialists in those areas who can provide support."

After his election in 2019, Mayor Justin Elicker assembled a Transition Team to determine what objectives his administration should prioritize. In 2020, their long-term recommendations included a call to phase in a 1 percent allocation for the NHFPL from the city's General Fund.

The transition team acknowledged the library's limited hours were likely caused by budgetary constraints, writing that "when funding reaches 1%, additional staff can provide expanded library hours." The library's funding has not yet reached that threshold, and certain branches remain closed on both Fridays and Sundays.

"I'm always working to make sure that as much as we can, we're providing resources for our community while also not increasing taxes to a point where residents can't afford to live in New Haven," Elicker said in an April interview shortly after he proposed the 2027 fiscal year budget.

Elicker said that the city should not decide the library budget using an "arbitrary percentage" and noted that the city has invested more funds into pensions and debt service, prompting an increase in the overall budget that "makes the library percentage, even though it's increased significantly in actual dollars, look smaller."

Martorana wrote that budget constraints affect libraries nationwide, and that the library was grateful for the financial support of the New Haven Free Public Library Foundation, a nonprofit that raises funds to supplement the system's budget.

"They give us a fairly limited capital budget every two years to take care of the five buildings," NHFPL Foundation Board President Mary Ellen Savage said, referring to the city government.

Savage also said cuts to the Federal Communications Commission's E-Rate funding, which subsidizes the NHFPL's broadband internet cost, affect a valuable city resource. She wrote in an email to the News that New Haven residents rely on the library's internet, and that service cuts in other areas or fundraising will be needed to offset these costs.

Savage said that the quality of a public library reflects the "quality of the culture" of a city.

Anderson said she feels Yale students have a duty to support the public library system through volunteering and advocacy.

"I do think for Yale students, who use the Yale library and appreciate the fact that it feels the way it does, that it is a moral call to action to be a part of making that a reality for all of the young people and the learners and the elders in the city that they call home for four years," Anderson said.

The New Haven Free Public Library first opened in 1887.



ABBY ASSOUAD / PHOTOGRAPHY EDITOR
A library employee's September testimony at a Board of Alders meeting cited inadequate funding from New Haven's budget as a factor driving a staff decline, echoing past calls for the city to increase the portion of its budget it allocates to libraries.

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