

# Public Service

## An Interview with The Honorable Jesse White, Secretary of State, Illinois

**EDITORS' NOTE** Jesse White is Illinois' 37th Secretary of State. White was first elected to the office in 1998 and was reelected in 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014, and then for a record-breaking sixth term in 2018. Prior to his election as Secretary of State, White served as Cook County Recorder of Deeds – a job to which he was first elected in 1992 and re-elected in 1996. Before that, he served 16 years in the Illinois General Assembly, representing the most



The Hon. Jesse White

culturally, economically and racially diverse district in Illinois. In 1959, White founded the internationally known Jesse White Tumbling Team to serve as a positive alternative for at-risk children residing in public housing in and around the Chicago area. Since its inception, more than 18,500 young men and women have performed with the team. White has spent 61 years working as a volunteer with the team to help kids stay away from gangs, drugs, alcohol and smoking, and to help set at-risk youth on the path to success. In 2014, the Chicago Park District opened the Jesse White Community Center and Field House in honor of White's lifelong contributions to the community. In addition, a school in Hazel Crest, Illinois, was recently named the Jesse C. White Learning Academy, and Division Street in Chicago was designated Jesse White Way in honor of White. White served as a paratrooper in the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne Division and as a member of the Illinois National Guard and Reserve. He played professional baseball with the Chicago Cubs organization, which was followed by a 33-year career with the Chicago Public Schools as a teacher and administrator. He earned his BS degree from Alabama State College (now Alabama State University) in 1957, where he was a two-sport athlete earning all-conference honors in baseball and basketball. In May 1995, White was inducted into the Southwestern Athletic Conference Hall of Fame. He was an all-city baseball and basketball player at Chicago's Waller High School (now Lincoln Park High School) and was inducted into the Chicago Public League Basketball Coaches Association Hall of Fame in June 1995. In 1999, he was inducted into the Alabama State University Sports Hall of Fame.

### What attracted you to public service and did you know that this was a passion of yours from an early age?

I have always been drawn to helping people. I was proud to serve my country as a paratrooper in the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne Division and as a member of the Illinois National Guard and Reserve. In addition, I played professional baseball with the Chicago Cubs organization. After returning home, I began teaching school and planned a successful show

in the gymnasium with children tumbling. I founded the Jesse White Tumbling Team in 1959 to serve as a positive alternative for at-risk children residing in public housing in and around the Chicago area. Since its inception, more than 18,500 young men and women have performed with the team, which is designed to help kids stay away from gangs, drugs, alcohol and smoking, and to help set at-risk youth on the path to success.

I enjoyed a 33-year career with the Chicago Public Schools as a teacher and administrator. It was rewarding to help students achieve their goals and to provide them with guidance and support. After my teaching career, pursuing public service was a natural progression for me, and I was fortunate to have the support of many public figures, including Cook County Board President George Dunne.

My first elected position was as a state representative in the Illinois General Assembly, representing the most culturally, economically and racially diverse district in Illinois. I spent 16 years as a state representative before I was elected Cook County Recorder of Deeds – a position I held for six years before I was elected Illinois Secretary of State.

**How do you define the role of Secretary of State and what are the keys to being successful in the role?**

The Illinois Secretary of State's office is the largest of its kind in the nation. As the second-largest state constitutional office, the Secretary of State's office is visited by more Illinois residents than any other office in state government. The office generates nearly \$2.5 billion in annual revenue with more than \$1.5 billion a year designated for state highway construction funds. The office registers investment advisers, securities dealers, lobbyists and businesses. It also manages one of the largest computer databases in Illinois, keeping track of approximately 9 million drivers, 11 million registered vehicles and more than 875,000 registered business entities. The office provides an important resource to educate the public about traffic and school bus safety, drunk driving, securities fraud, literacy and organ/tissue donation.

In general, there are three keys to being successful in this unique role: providing the highest level of customer service possible by streamlining operations and expanding online transaction capabilities; striving to make the roads of Illinois safer; and establishing an office culture that encourages employees to have the highest levels of integrity and ethical behavior. As the Secretary of State, I feel it is important to travel the state listening to, responding to and communicating with the public.

### Will you highlight the Organ and Tissue Donor program that you spearheaded in Illinois and the impact of the program?

The Organ and Tissue Donor Program is a program that is very meaningful to me personally



Secretary White is the longest-serving Secretary of State in Illinois history. He was first elected in 1998 and won landslide victories in 2002, in which he won all 102 counties, and again in 2006, 2010, and 2014. In 2018, White was elected to a record-breaking sixth term, in which he earned over 3.1 million votes statewide – the most ever by a statewide candidate in a midterm election.



*As State Librarian, Secretary White has promoted literacy at events and libraries across the state.*

and professionally. My sister received a kidney transplant and lived an additional 27 years because of the gift. As Secretary of State, I head the organ donor program, and because of our donor registry and public outreach, more than 7.2 million people have registered with the program. We initiated legislation creating the First Person Consent Organ/Tissue Donor Registry, which makes a person's decision to donate legally binding. I have also championed legislation to allow 16- and 17-year-olds to register when they receive their driver's license and ID card. I will continue to promote this lifesaving program after my sixth term as Illinois Secretary of State has concluded.

**Will you discuss your key priorities and initiatives as you look to the remainder of your term?**

First and foremost, I want to continue serving the people in a manner that makes them proud. Recently, we have launched an appointment system for behind-the-wheel road tests, REAL IDs, standard driver's licenses and ID cards at 16 Chicagoland Driver Services facilities. This addresses the heavy customer volume caused by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. We are expanding this program to an additional 13 facilities throughout central and downstate Illinois over the next couple of months. This program will improve the delivery of services and address the heavy volume at our larger facilities.

In addition, I want to continue expanding online services so even more people can transact business from the comfort of their homes. We have seen online transactions with my office nearly double over the last couple of years.

During the pandemic, my office has continued to serve the public, including

face-to-face transactions, in a safe and responsible manner. This will also continue as the health and safety of my employees and the public remain paramount.

**What made you decide that this would be your last term serving as Secretary of State in Illinois?**

I have been blessed with good health and have accomplished many initiatives I set

out to fulfill when I first ran for Secretary of State over 23 years ago. We have built the state's Organ and Tissue Donor program into a national model. We have made the roads much safer, and teen driving deaths are down by 74 percent since we overhauled the state's Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) program. We reformed the trucking program, transforming it from one of the nation's worst into one of the best. We cleaned up an office that had been under a cloud of controversy and changed the culture, eliminating all forms of institutional corruption. I can say we have made a difference in the lives of Illinoisans, and this makes me proud.

**You have accomplished many achievements during your long tenure as Secretary of State. What are you most proud of?**

As the longest serving Secretary of State in Illinois history, I am proud to have impacted this state by improving road safety and saving lives, building the state's organ and tissue donor registry into a national model, cleaning up an office that was under a cloud of controversy and corruption under my predecessor, and providing the highest level of customer service possible by streamlining operations and expanding online transaction capabilities.

**What do you tell young people about the importance and fulfillment of public service?**

Public service is a way we can give back to the community and make a difference in improving other people's lives. Regardless of whether a young person wishes to pursue public service or another career, I encourage them to believe in themselves, to never stop learning and to do something good for someone every day. That is how I try to live my life. ●



*Secretary White was signed to an honorary Major League contract by the Chicago Cubs in honor of his 7-year professional baseball career with the Cubs organization. White played for the AAA Salt Lake City Bees in 1963 and 1964, during which time he was named the most popular player on the team both years. White had a career batting average of .291 and was elected to two All-Star games.*