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## Race is on to gather signatures for petitions for September primary in New Haven (video)

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NEW HAVEN — With the Democrats' endorsements finalized, those left out are hitting the ground running to collect signatures to get on the ballot as petitioning candidates in a September primary.

Those with the highest threshold to meet are the mayoral challengers, who must each get 2,092 signatures by 4 p.m. Aug. 10 to be on the ballot. In reality, they must gather even more signatures to ensure they have enough qualifying signatures from registered city Democrats.

So the challengers gathered their teams and started pounding the pavement with clipboards and pens. In the running are budget watchdog Jeffrey Kerekes, who last week grabbed coveted votes at the Democratic Town Committee nominating convention; local lawyer Clifton Graves Jr. and former aldermen Anthony Dawson and Robert Lee.

Kerekes made his signature-gathering debut at the downtown farmers market Wednesday, and then headed over to the Farnham Courts housing projects.

Armed with a list of registered Democrats in the neighborhood, he knocked on doors and explained his mission.

One woman signed and then unloaded a laundry list of complaints about New Haven. Most of them pertained to life at Farnam Courts and having to deal with the violence.

Thirty-year Farnam Courts resident Bernadette Perry told Kerekes she'd like to see a change in city leadership. Asked what she would like to see change at Farnam Courts, she responded: "The neighborhood cleaned up and us stop living like we're in jail."

Kerekes tells the people he meets about the city's Youth at Work program. He says that 13 percent of the kids who got jobs through the program are from suburbs. Kerekes' point is: Those jobs should be going to New Haven kids.

On the other side of the city, at "Graves for Mayor" headquarters on Whalley Avenue, volunteers went over signatures and got tips from campaign manager Wendell Harp, husband of longtime Democratic state Sen. Toni Harp.

Claudine Wilkins-Chambers is one of about 40 people knocking on doors for Graves.

"The people we talk to are excited," she said.

On Wednesday, she accompanied Graves to the Prescott Bush senior housing complex, where the candidate chatted with residents.

"Today, we are solely here to get your signatures so we can get on the ballot," he said.

Ida Wells, 90, a resident and former Housing Authority commissioner, said she has respect for Mayor John DeStefano Jr., but she respects Graves, too, and thinks he should have a chance to run. So Wells signed the petition, but she is undecided on who will get her vote. Her concerns?

"We need more for our young folks, but don't take too much from the old. We already are living on mere pittance," she said.

Reached Friday, Dawson said he has people citywide collecting signatures for him. He had a few hundred names on petitions, he said.

"I've been to Tower East, the Hill, Newhallville, Dixwell. And I'll be heading out to East Shore and Westville and East Rock," he said. "I'll be all over."

Dawson said he's heard concerns ranging from lack of services to too much money being spent on litigation, especially after this week's news of a \$2 million settlement with the firefighters who won a reverse discrimination lawsuit. A lot of people he sees are eager to talk.

"Some of them are thanking me because they haven't seen any politicians out to talk about the issues," he said.

Lee could not be reached for comment.

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