



CHAPTER 12

BUILDING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Introduction

As each Election Day approaches, the business of election administration grows exponentially in size and scope. An operation normally contained in one central election office with a small staff grows to hundreds or thousands of polling places and poll workers for a short period, stretching already-limited resources and capacities.

To make this larger operation work smoothly, effectively, and transparently, an election official may want to seek the help of civic, charitable, business, educational, governmental, or nonprofit organizations within his or her community. Such organizations may be in a position to help supplement limited elections office resources and provide helpful insight.

Election Day is truly a communitywide event that needs the involvement of the entire community to ensure success. Any election official who may not have worked with outside organizations may be pleasantly surprised with the community's enthusiasm to assist.

IMPORTANT REMINDER ★ ★ ★

Jurisdictions are reminded to implement these voluntary practices only after reviewing State and local laws and regulations. Local election officials should contact their State election officials with questions about the legality of a specific policy or procedure in their State.

Establishing Partnerships

Many successful election officials begin an election cycle by reviewing operational needs and wants. An election official's best source of advice is usually his or her internal staff. For example, the elections office staff can help determine which operational needs and wants can be funded in the existing budget and which ones must remain unfunded or

receive funding through other means. Likewise, the office staff can contribute ideas for forging partnerships within the community.

Creativity is key to the success of establishing a valuable community partnership. An election official might conduct a staff meeting to brainstorm ways in which any unfunded operational needs might be met through innovative solutions. To encourage discussion, before opening the brainstorming session, the election official could provide staff with best practices recommendations from other election jurisdictions.

An election official is encouraged to reach out to local, State, regional, and national election official professional organizations for advice on a variety of topics. An election official has many opportunities to network and share ideas and solutions with others in similar situations. For example, election officials in Florida are part of the Florida State Association of Supervisors of Elections (FSASE), which conducts regular meetings to share information. Furthermore, the Election Assistance Commission (EAC) has produced voluntary guidelines and best practices that are available to election officials at www.eac.gov.

After determining his or her operational needs and wants and providing the elections office staff an opportunity to brainstorm solutions, an election official is ready for the next step: creating a plan for developing community partnerships. Such partnerships allow for a more strategic use of monetary resources, while still permitting unfunded needs to be met. At the same time, the partnering organizations benefit from increased visibility, satisfaction from community service, and the opportunity to serve their members.

To form partnerships, an election official can approach a variety of sources, such as civic, busi-

ness, education, and government groups, any of which can provide assistance and support to the elections office during an election. Although an election official will benefit from his or her own creative thinking in this part of the process, he or she may want to consider the following sample of potential partners:

- ★ Nonprofit, religious, and charitable organizations.
- ★ Businesses and trade groups.
- ★ High schools, community colleges, and universities.
- ★ County and local government agencies.
- ★ Advocates.

During the creative process, an election official may consider the organizations of greatest significance within his or her particular jurisdiction. By tailoring efforts to build partnerships with such organizations, an election official can truly foster partnerships that reflect the unique needs of the local voters.

Types of Partnerships

An election official has numerous jobs to fill and tasks to complete before Election Day. He or she will likely hire and train poll workers, establish and inspect polling places for American with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance, overcome technology challenges, and inform voters. An election official can accomplish these tasks by capitalizing on opportunities within the larger community.

Partnerships with Election Officials

An election official can establish a partnership with other election officials. Working with colleagues in surrounding jurisdictions provides “economies of scale” benefits to the elections office. Some election officials have learned that even small cost savings, when compounded over several election cycles, can quickly add up to large amounts.

An election official has several options for partnering with other election officials. For example, each election official might consider seeking partnerships with other election offices to pool resources. Smaller election jurisdictions might partner with each other to fund and manage election support services, such as election programming and technology field support. By reaching out to nearby

jurisdictions that use the same vote tabulation software, the jurisdictions can share staff and resources for election setup, logic and accuracy testing, and equipment delivery.

Such multijurisdictional partnerships can also extend to interactions with area civic, business, education, and government groups. Some election officials who have partnerships with various organizations have found that a multijurisdictional, united approach can lead to better results.

By pooling resources and staff, an election official in a large metropolitan area that encompasses several election jurisdictions could reach out to major corporations to request partnerships that include some “civic-duty” pay for employees. For example, an employee at a partnered corporation could become a poll worker in his or her home jurisdiction while still receiving his or her regular salary. As an added bonus, the employee would also receive payment from the local elections office to work at the polls.¹

Intergovernmental Partnerships

An election official can establish partnerships with city, county, and State government entities, which often are experienced in creating coalitions between local yet disparate groups.

To respond to natural disasters or other disruptive events, the local emergency operations department relies on partnerships within the community. With such experience in partnering, the department could provide election officials with the names and contact information for other appropriate government agencies. The department may also have access to a control room with phone dispatch availability, which could serve as the Election Day command center.

For example, Pennsylvania election officials have a partnership that is considered critical to Election Day operations in the State. On Election Day, the Secretary of State’s office constantly communicates with the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency regarding weather conditions and traffic issues that could affect access to polling places across the State.

¹ For more information about managing poll workers, review the EAC’s Successful Practices for Poll Worker Recruitment, Training, and Retention. The guidebook is available at www.eac.gov.

Regardless of weather conditions and other factors, on Election Day, an election official must dispatch resources throughout the jurisdiction. The local emergency operations department could provide expert advice for accomplishing this task. If the department already has resources in place, it might make them available to the elections office on Election Day.

To obtain the power service and equipment necessary to continue to run local elections despite natural disasters or any other event that could potentially interrupt an election, an election official might consider building relationships with State and local emergency operations early in the election cycle. An election official might also consider creating a Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP)², which can be well tested and practiced before Election Day.

For an election official, an initial partnership with the emergency operations department is only a first step in partnering. Emergency operations may have existing partnerships with surrounding municipalities, school districts, large corporations, and so on. The elections office staff could build on the department's already-existing partnerships rather than starting to build new relationships from scratch.

By partnering with agencies such as the emergency operations department, an election official can benefit from not limiting partnerships to other agencies that deal directly with elections. By considering how effective election administration intersects with other government functions, an election official can partner with departments in those fields to build a coordinated plan.

For example, some elections office staff have consulted with the public transportation department to ensure that polling places are accessible via mass transit on Election Day. Others have partnered with the local health department to create a voter outreach plan for senior citizens in assisted-living facilities.

Partnerships with Poll Workers

For an election official, one of the most difficult aspects of running an election is finding hundreds, if not thousands, of poll workers to work on Elec-

tion Day. When an election official establishes partnerships to recruit poll workers, though, he or she has many more opportunities to reach out to the community. By recognizing that all community groups are composed of people, an election official can focus on those people to become poll workers for the next election.

Civic Organizations—Some election officials have found that area civic organizations are a good source of poll workers. Because these service-oriented organizations have strong ties to their communities, local election officials often contact their representatives, request an opportunity to speak at the groups' monthly meetings, or submit written requests for poll workers in organization newsletters.

An election official can approach the civic organization in at least two ways. First, he or she can recruit individuals from the organization as he or she would recruit any prospective poll workers—one at a time. Or, an election official can implement an innovative option—the Adopt-a-Precinct program—that has been working well for several election cycles across the country.

For example, the Adopt-a-Precinct program in Orange County, Florida, works like a fundraiser. The individual poll workers, who are recruited through the partnership between the civic group and the elections office, decline payment for their poll worker service and, instead, donate their “earnings” to their organization. In addition to raising funds for their organization, the participating groups often receive recognition for their service. Some election officials with similar programs present awards to these groups at thank-you ceremonies that are open to the public and the press.

Local Businesses—An election official can also approach local businesses with an Adopt-a-Precinct program, which can be a public relations boon for the businesses. A local business willing to allow its employees to work at a polling place could gain positive publicity for its participation. Some election offices establish a way for promoting such partnerships. For example, they assign groups of employees from one business to work together at a designated polling place for every election. In return for allowing its employees the day off with pay (in addition to the poll worker compensation

² For more information about COOP, review chapter 11, “Contingency Planning and Change Management,” in the EAC’s Election Management Guidelines.

for the individual employees), the elections office publicizes the local business with a small advertising sign outside the polling place.

An election official can tailor similar poll worker recruitment programs to appeal to individual citizens. For example, if an election official's jurisdiction has a very active veteran population, he or she can reach out to establish an Honor-a-Vet program in the community. In general, such appeals to individual citizens are well received, especially when they are made in conjunction with well-respected groups such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), which, like similar organizations, have nationwide membership bases. With their help, an election official may find opportunities to recruit poll workers through means that otherwise would be unavailable to his or her office.

When creating an Adopt-a-Precinct program an election official would want to consider the public's perception of impartiality in election administration. For example, if a business or civic organization considering participation in the program were also active politically, either by supporting a candidate or by being known for its support of an issue, the election official would want to exercise caution before accepting the organization's application for participation in the Adopt-a-Precinct program. Although an election official can overcome such public perception concerns, he or she needs to be aware of these concerns when developing suitable programs for his or her jurisdiction.

State and Local Governments—An election official can also create partnerships with poll workers by recruiting them from within State and local governments. Government employees, including teachers (if the school district is closed on Election Day), make excellent poll workers. If State and local law allows, government employees may be eligible to receive their regular day's salary in addition to the poll worker stipend if they work as poll workers on Election Day.

Minority Language Organizations—In many jurisdictions, election officials must administer elections in languages other than English. In such cases, an election official will want to recruit and train poll workers who speak the alternative languages. By creating partnerships with civic organizations that

cater to such communities with people who speak a minority language, an election official will have found the most efficient way to recruit bilingual poll workers.

Local High Schools—An election official may also find that the local secondary school system is a viable partnership for recruiting poll workers. High school students are bright, enthusiastic, and easy to train, and they have the stamina to work long hours on Election Day. Assuming that the jurisdiction's laws and regulations allow high school students to work at the polls, an election official may want to consider the following example of how to establish a high school poll worker program. (It is advisable that a local election official prepare a presentation for school administrators, which includes the number of students desired, their precincts and duties, and training requirements. With this presentation prepared, an election official is ready to approach the schools.)

In taking the first step for establishing a high school poll worker program, an election official contacts the area's school principals to discuss the program. The election official should not ask that students be excused from school. School officials will be wary of allowing a mass absence of students, because school districts are evaluated, in part, on their average daily attendance. Instead, the official should suggest setting up a program that can be considered an official school function, similar to a field trip, which allows the school to count the student poll workers as "in attendance" while they serve as poll workers. This type of program would also allow the student to list his or her poll worker experience as civic activity on future college admission applications.

When meeting with school principals, an election official might emphasize that all the training would take place after school and during weekends and that the only effect on the school would be on Election Day, when the students work at the polls. An election official could also emphasize that the program is "win-win-win." The election official wins, because he or she gets poll workers. The students win, because they learn a great civics lesson. The school wins, because it will likely receive positive press coverage. To persuade the school principal, an election official might show a sample

press release that praises the principal and school for agreeing to an important community service project.

An election official might also design tailored poll worker training for high school students. He or she may ask school officials to review the training program and encourage them to make suggestions for making it more relevant to the students.

Local Universities—An election official may also create partnerships for recruiting poll workers at local universities. For example, clubs and student government organizations are often an excellent source of poll workers. An election official may want to initiate university contact with the president of the student body, who might be able to facilitate a university-wide program. To identify such a student leader, an election official might contact the student activities office for information about the college’s clubs and organizations, especially politically oriented clubs such as the Young Democrats and Young Republicans. In addition, because many fraternities and sororities have community service requirements for their members, an election official may want establish partnerships with these groups.

When an election official hires individual college students as poll workers, he or she does not need the college’s approval, but it is prudent for the official to aim for a partnership akin to the high school partnership described previously. In fact, the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) provides grants during each Federal election cycle for partnerships between election offices and colleges for recruiting poll workers. The EAC also provides additional guidance to election officials through *A Guidebook for Recruiting College Poll Workers*.³

An election official may also establish a longer term partnership with a university by creating courses or majors in election administration or by providing internships or mentorships to interested students. The official could approach an academic department such as Political Science, for example, to offer such practical learning opportunities.

Polling Places and Vote Centers

An election official may want the community’s help for more than recruiting poll workers. Because most

elections offices are large enough only to conduct voter registration, store materials, and perhaps allow for training activities, most local election officials do not have enough space under their direct control to serve as polling places or vote centers. Therefore, an election official might create partnerships with civic groups, businesses, and schools to establish polling place locations in their facilities when permissible under State and local law.

An election official might try to locate potential polling places through a “Polling Place Location Drive,” in partnership with local business organizations. Some businesses have sufficient space to act as polling places or centrally located vote centers on Election Day or during early voting. To ensure the impartiality of election administration, however, an election official would want to inform businesses about the prohibited electioneering activities near a polling place.

An election official may also set a goal to improve the quality of potential locations. An elections office might consider partnering with the disabilities community to ensure that current and/or potential polling places meet the requirements of the ADA. For example, the elections office in the city of Alexandria, Virginia, communicates constantly with the local commission on human rights and with the commission on persons with disabilities to ensure that its polling places meet the needs of the entire electorate.

Technical Support

An election official often depends on technical support for at least some voting technology on Election Day. For example, if polling places transmit returns electronically to the elections office at the end of Election Day, the office benefits from having information technology (IT) assistance available. Yet, a local election official can benefit from an in-house technical support professional for many aspects of the election cycle. For some election officials, such support may be available only through a partnership. For example, a local government office can be an excellent resource for technical assistance during an election. Other government agencies may be able to share IT assistance to help set up the technology in polling places on Election Day.

An election official may find additional technical assistance through his or her partnership with

³ A Guidebook for Recruiting College Poll Workers is available at the EAC’s Web site at www.eac.gov.

a university. Several State elections offices have partnered with computer science or technology-based research departments at local colleges with great success. For example, the Secretary of State in Georgia has partnered with Kennesaw State University for voting system certification, election setup and logic, and accuracy testing. Likewise, the Voting Technology Research Center at the University of Connecticut advises the Connecticut State elections office. Students and professors have tested and evaluated voting equipment, conducted software verification, and held mock elections to compare multiple voting systems. Their work fuels ongoing academic research and reinforces program curricula. Often, such programs receive substantial funding from the university itself, making this option more affordable to the elections office than if it hired a professional technical consultant.

In an ongoing effort to maintain visibility in the community, an election official may want to team with web design groups to pursue innovative revisions to the office's online presence and services.

Voter Outreach

An election official who wants to involve the community might establish partnerships for voter outreach initiatives. Businesses, civic groups, language minority groups, government offices, and schools all have different ways of disseminating information to potential voters. The method of outreach depends on the type of group and its capability and assets, but, because an election official might not have access to the groups' membership lists, he or she will often need to defer to the groups for reaching those potential voters.

An election official may reach out to these groups to help distribute voter registration and election information. With some partnerships, the election official simply tailors press releases about voter registration deadlines, early voting opportunities, polling place locations, and poll worker recruitment to specific groups. When dealing with fixed-location partners, such as businesses, an election official might ask his or her partners to notify potential voters by posting information at high-traffic locations and distributing flyers to customers at the checkout counter. An election official may also ask these local partners to distribute the information via printed

materials and through Web site announcements and e-mail lists.

Depending on the characteristics of the jurisdiction, an election official may want to focus on establishing partnerships that serve underrepresented demographic groups. These groups may help bring elections office resources to otherwise neglected communities, identify gaps in existing services, and improve the reputation of the elections office. Especially when attempting to reach language minority voters with limited proficiency in English, an election official might team with civic organizations that have roots in those communities to disseminate information as widely as possible in a way that is most helpful to the population.

Voter outreach partnerships can also be effective in rural jurisdictions, where the locale has developed a strong sense of identity and kinship that an election official can best use through working relationships with different organizations and groups within the community.

Managing Partnerships

Although the structure of a community partnership is often dictated by its specific circumstances, an election official can employ best practices on how to manage a community partnership after it has been established.

When planning for a partnership, an election official may want to consider the following suggestions:

- ★ Collaborate with other members of the partnership on a mission statement and goals for the partnership.
- ★ Decide on a leadership structure. Discuss whether one person will be in charge or if all decisions will be made democratically. It might be necessary to create some sort of leadership team or joint advisory board that is empowered to make key decisions.
- ★ Define how the elections office staff will interact with the partnering organization. Decide if one staff member will be the single point of contact, acting like a liaison, or if the responsibility will fall on each staffer as he or she conducts daily tasks.
- ★ Foster communication and cooperation in the partnership by allowing members of each group to learn from each other. It might be helpful to provide training on each organization's work or

offer job-shadowing opportunities or other trust-building activities.

- ★ Create a budget for the partnership and a clear strategy for cost sharing, if appropriate.
- ★ Build on each partner's strengths to maximize effectiveness.
- ★ Brainstorm relevant stakeholders and, from the first day, involve them in the partnership planning process.
- ★ Seek out media-friendly champions for the partnership who can increase visibility and investment in the partnership's programs.
- ★ Set clear timelines and responsibilities for all participants in the partnership.
- ★ Publicize the goals and accomplishments of the partnership through appropriate media outlets.

More suggestions for effective elections office administration will be available in a forthcoming *Election Management Guidelines* chapter on the subject.

Recognizing Partners

An election official recognizes the importance acknowledging the partnerships he or she makes by publicizing the partners. Although most groups would likely volunteer without any commendation, everybody likes to receive recognition for their contribution to the process. Some local officials have created recognition programs, such as a "Democracy Award" program, to acknowledge the efforts of their partners.

Election Day is a communitywide event. State and local election officials have a lot of responsibility for making that day a success, but they do not have to do it alone. Throughout the country election officials are using the community's human resources and civic commitment to make elections work better for everyone. A creative election official will always be rewarded for involving the community in the election process.

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