



Testimony of Jeannie Layson
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Good afternoon Commissioners, Executive Director Tom Wilkey and General Counsel Mark Robbins. I am pleased to be here today to discuss an election administration mentoring initiative that Chair Donetta Davidson asked me to develop.

The time has come for a modern information exchange in election administration due to the many changes in elections that have occurred over a very short period of time. In the 10 years since the passage of the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA), election administration has changed dramatically.

The election administration mentoring initiative will provide an opportunity to connect experience with need in the election administration community. The initiative will be Web-based and hosted on EAC.gov. The content will consist of a list of participating election officials, both those who are willing to offer their expertise in specific areas and those officials seeking information and solutions. For example, under the list of election officials offering expertise, you would see the name of the official, the jurisdiction, and a list of practice areas, such as contingency planning.

Ten years ago, early voting was rare. Absentee ballot tracking, vote centers, and ballot-on-demand were unheard of and live webcasts of the vote tabulation process were not available. Yet innovations such as these have become increasingly commonplace.

HAVA was a catalyst for many election reforms by providing funds to states to modernize their voting systems and voter registration databases. For instance, the HAVA-mandated move to statewide voter registration databases facilitated the migration from paper poll books to digital poll books, which makes the voter check-in process faster and more accurate. Commissioners have personally observed poll workers using the poll books and commenting about how much easier the voter check-in process has become.

Some of the biggest innovations have taken place on the web, where voters in a majority of states can verify their voter registration, get directions to their polling place, and download a sample ballot from the Web site of their elections office.

Jurisdictions are also electronically transmitting registration materials and blank ballots to military and overseas voters to help ensure they receive their ballots on time and to comply with the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act, which Congress passed in 2009.

Voting by mail has also become more widespread this decade. Some areas offer all voters, not just UOCAVA voters the ability to track their absentee ballot. Through a barcode on the ballot envelope, the ballot is scanned before it enters the mail system and when it's returned to the elections office. Voters in some jurisdictions can also check the status of a provisional ballot online.

Vote centers offer voters the flexibility to vote at a designated location that is convenient for them. Electronic poll books made it possible for voter check-in information to be updated and shared countywide in real time.

Election offices are also opening their election-night operations to the public. For example, Orange County, California, which has 1.6 million registered voters, uses the Internet to increase transparency, providing a streaming video of election night operations, including vote-by-mail ballot procedures and updates of election results every 30 minutes.

Numerous counties have embraced social media to communicate with voters and the news media about polling place hours, wait times and closures. Douglas County, Kan., used Twitter during a local election in 2009 to inform voters of a polling place closure due to a fire. News outlets saw the feed and broadcast the news within minutes. Broward County, Florida and Forsyth County, Georgia posted early voting wait times on their Web site so people could avoid lines. Counties also used mobile phone text messaging to coordinate Election Day activities with poll workers.

Election officials who implemented these innovations, such as early voting, online customer service features for voters and poll books had to also create procedures to accompany them. They have learned valuable lessons after launching these innovations during an election. Chair Davidson believes the EAC should take the lead in collecting information, procedures and policies from seasoned election officials and pairing them with the next generation of election officials.

A few months ago, Chair Davidson and I had a discussion about how the Election Assistance Commission could be of value to election officials who are facing challenges related to budget shortfalls and subsequently fewer resources. She was especially focused on helping election officials at the local level, who often do not have the resources to attend professional conferences or events where they could learn about innovative solutions and exchange ideas with their peers. She also expressed concern about a heavy reliance on voting machine vendors, and the rapid staff turnover in the election administration field, and how to make sure procedures, best practices and experience were passed on to new administrators.

Chair Davidson also reflected upon the additional responsibilities election officials now have due to media scrutiny, the ever increasing use of technology, the demands due to increased transparency and public involvement in the voting process. These new components of the

election official's job contribute to public confidence in the process, but they also require new skill sets and add more tasks to an already demanding, full-time job.

To help election officials save time and money and have immediate access to proven solutions, Chair Davidson proposed a mentoring initiative -- a central platform in which experienced election officials could offer their knowledge to the newer professionals in the field. The mentoring initiative would be Web-based and hosted at EAC.gov, and offer a platform where election officials can share their experiences with new innovations and practices that have helped them better serve their voters. In addition, election officials would identify their areas of expertise, such as contingency planning, change management or poll worker training, so those needing assistance in specific areas would be able to identify a peer with the desired expertise and experience. Chair Davidson reflected that having such a resource would have been valuable to her at the beginning of her tenure as the Bent County clerk and recorder in Las Animas, Colorado.

The next steps are to develop the Web-based tool and encourage election officials to get involved, either by offering to serve as a resource or requesting expertise. I anticipate we will have this feature available by February 2011.

The election official mentoring initiative would not require additional funding by the EAC or by the election officials who participate, just EAC staff time, creative thinking and a spirit of cooperation among the elections community. I thank Chair Davidson for giving me the opportunity to work on this project, and I look forward to working with election officials, commissioners and EAC staff to launch the initiative. I would be glad to answer any questions you may have.