



U.S. Election Assistance Commission – National Clearinghouse (2025)

Chief Open House: Where Nervous Poll Workers Become Confident Leaders



Overview

In Fairfax County, 530 Chief and Assistant Chief election officers are responsible for safely operating 265 polling places. These leaders must manage voting equipment, supervise staff, reconcile ballots, and certify accurate results after a long and demanding election day. Traditional lecture-style training could not fully prepare them for the complexity and responsibility of running a polling place.

We created Chief Open Houses: a full-day, drop-in, hands-on training where officers stay as long as needed and practice real election procedures. Ten stations allow Chiefs to operate ballot scanners and e-pollbooks, complete Statements of Results, practice reconciliation, grapple with complicated voter situations, handle election supplies and transport cages, and work through closing timelines using real forms and equipment.

Officers can also pick up their poll worker manuals early, creating a natural incentive to attend. About two-thirds participate voluntarily each election.

Since launching in 2023, Chief Open Houses have transformed preparation and confidence. Chiefs arrive on election day having already performed the most critical tasks, ensuring smoother operations and stronger election integrity.

Creativity and Innovation

Chief Open Houses transform poll worker training from passive instruction into immersive, hands-on preparation. Instead of watching presentations, Chiefs physically perform the exact procedures they will execute on election day.

Ten interactive stations recreate real election scenarios. Chiefs operate ballot scanners, open and close voting equipment, complete Statements of Results using both paper forms and our custom digital helper tool, and practice reconciliation. At the scanner tape station, they learn how to properly cut and attach required tapes. At the closing timeline station, Chiefs work through a hands-on exercise to determine the most efficient sequence of closing tasks and delegation responsibilities. They also get the chance to practice with non-routine voter situations to evaluate when to provisional ballots and determine what options to offer to voters in these circumstances.

Most importantly, the entire election office participates. Equipment specialists, trainers, logistics staff, and managers provide individualized guidance, creating real-time collaboration and building trust.

This transforms training into practical mastery. Chiefs leave knowing not just what to do, but how and why to do it.



Cost Effectiveness

Chief Open Houses deliver substantial operational improvements at virtually no financial cost. Events are held in existing county facilities and staffed entirely by approximately 15 full-time and 30 seasonal election staff already assigned to election preparation. No outside vendors, consultants, or new equipment are required.

By allowing Chiefs to practice complex procedures in advance, the program prevents problems that would otherwise require emergency support or post-election correction. Chiefs resolve issues independently because they have already performed the procedures in a controlled environment.

This proactive preparation reduces strain on election office staff, improves efficiency on election night, and prevents time-consuming follow-up work.

By leveraging existing facilities, staff expertise, and equipment, the program delivers exceptional impact while exercising disciplined use of public resources.

Can be Replicated by Other Offices

Chief Open Houses are highly replicable because they rely entirely on resources every election office already possesses: voting equipment, forms, supplies, and knowledgeable staff.

The model is simple and adaptable. Offices create hands-on stations where poll workers practice key procedures such as operating voting equipment, completing reconciliation forms, handling supplies, working through non-routine voter scenarios, and executing closing procedures. Officers attend voluntarily, stay as long as needed, and receive individualized guidance.

The program scales easily based on jurisdiction size and staffing. Smaller offices can offer fewer stations or lower staffing, while larger jurisdictions can expand participation.

Multiple other Virginia jurisdictions have already attended our Open Houses and expressed plans to replicate the model.

Because it requires coordination rather than new funding or technology, this program can be successfully implemented by election offices nationwide.



Meets Category Requirements

Chief Open Houses directly strengthen recruitment, training, and retention by empowering the leaders who run each polling place.

Chief and Assistant Chief election officers carry the greatest responsibility on election day, yet many initially feel overwhelmed by the complexity of reconciliation, equipment operation, non-routine voters, and closing procedures. This program allows them to practice every critical task in advance, ask questions freely, and build confidence through real experience.

Post-election surveys consistently rank the Open House as the most valuable training opportunity we offer.

The program also encourages leadership development. Officers who were hesitant to serve as Chiefs gain the confidence to step into leadership roles after attending. Chiefs who feel prepared are more likely to return for future elections.

By investing in leadership preparation, we strengthen the entire poll worker workforce.

Improves Outcomes for Voters and Election Officials

Chief Open Houses produce measurable improvements in election performance and voter service. Since implementation, we have seen approximately 20% reduction in election day support calls, reconciliation errors, and closing delays. Chiefs also report approximately 35% higher confidence after attending.

The hands-on environment allows Chiefs to identify and correct misunderstandings before election day. Many discover gaps in their understanding while practicing reconciliation, equipment operation, or closing procedures, preventing errors during live voting. By working through the reasoning for non-routine voters and provisional voting in an open environment with live corrective feedback, Chiefs can correct any misunderstandings that might have otherwise translated to mistakes on election day, ultimately leading to better service to voters.

Time and time again, we have seen first-time Chiefs arrive nervous and stay for several hours, practicing procedures and asking questions. On election day, they consistently run a smooth and successful polling place.

Overall, better-prepared Chiefs create more efficient polling places, accurate results, and a smoother voting experience, strengthening voter confidence and improving outcomes.



Chief Open House Training Stations

The Chief Open House consists of ten hands-on training stations designed to replicate critical election day procedures. Each station is staffed by experienced election personnel and allows Chief and Assistant Chief Election Officers to practice real tasks using actual equipment, forms, and supplies.

1. Pollbook Station

Chiefs practice using electronic pollbooks with realistic, non-routine voter scenarios. Multiple pollbooks are available so officers can work through situations such as voter lookup issues, address updates, and other complex cases. This prepares Chiefs to confidently assist voters and support their teams when unexpected situations arise.

2. Ballot Marking Device Station

Ballot marking devices are fully set up for hands-on use. Chiefs and Assistant Chiefs operate the equipment themselves so they are prepared to assist voters who choose to use accessible voting options. This ensures Chiefs can confidently support all voters and troubleshoot equipment when needed.

3. Ballot Scanner Station

Chiefs practice opening and closing procedures using actual ballot scanners. They learn how to properly initialize the equipment, monitor operation, and complete closing procedures. This gives Chiefs confidence in managing one of the most critical pieces of equipment at the polling place.

4. Closing the Polls Forms Station

All forms required during closing procedures are laid out with both blank and completed examples. Chiefs review each form, understand its purpose, and learn exactly how to complete it correctly. This reduces uncertainty and ensures accurate and efficient closing procedures.



5. Statement of Results Station

The Statement of Results is the most important reconciliation document completed on election night. Chiefs practice completing the form using real-world examples and our custom digital helper tool. Staff provide individualized guidance to ensure Chiefs understand reconciliation and can complete the form accurately and confidently.

6. Scanner Tapes Station

Chiefs learn how to properly handle configuration and results tapes printed from ballot scanners. Using laminated sample tapes and forms, they practice cutting, organizing, and attaching tapes as required. This hands-on practice ensures compliance with procedural requirements and prevents errors during closing.

7. Closing Timeline Exercise Station

Chiefs participate in an interactive exercise to determine the correct sequence of closing procedures. They decide which tasks must be completed in order and which can be delegated to other officers. This exercise helps Chiefs develop an efficient closing strategy and prepares them for the demands of election night.

8. Election Supplies Station

Samples of all supplies issued to polling places are displayed for review. Chiefs familiarize themselves with supply contents and learn about any new materials or procedures. This ensures they know what to expect and how to use all provided resources effectively.

9. Equipment Cage Station

Equipment transport cages are displayed so Chiefs can practice opening, inspecting, and resealing them. This prepares Chiefs to verify supplies upon arrival at their polling place and ensures proper chain-of-custody procedures are followed.



10. Election Officer Portal Station

Chiefs practice using the Election Officer Portal, including the digital Chief's Checklist. This tool guides them through key procedures on election day. Staff demonstrate best practices and answer questions, ensuring Chiefs can fully utilize this resource.

11. Non-Routine Voters Station

Chiefs use their poll worker manual and related guides to work through sample non-routine voter situations, including voter who are not registered and voters who have moved from their registered address. In order to ensure each voter has the best chance of their vote being counted, it's important for Chiefs to properly follow applicable guidance when issuing same day registration provisional ballots. Staff help guide Chiefs through the decision-making process for when to issue a provisional ballot and when to direct a voter to another precinct, use an additional form, or offer another option.



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