![Jefferson County Colorado | Clerk and Recorder Elections]

**EAC 2020 CLEARINGHOUSE AWARD NOMINATION**

**Category:** Outstanding Innovations Competition

**Applicant:** Jefferson County Elections

**Program:** Online chat

## Submission contact:

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**Summary**
Making sure that voters have the information they need is the linchpin of administering a safe, secure and accessible election. To that end, the Jefferson County Elections division engages with residents in myriad ways so that everything from ballot drop box locations to major deadlines are communicated as clearly as possible. For example, we simplified our website address to make it easier to remember (VoteJeffco.com); created video explainers that answer frequently asked questions; flagged key dates on social media; and used press interviews to reach wide audiences.

That said, voters will always have questions as Election Day approaches. Like our counterparts across the country, we prepare accordingly by staffing a call center once ballots are in the mail to voters (about three weeks before Election Day). But after a busy presidential primary in March 2020, our call center workers realized that much of the information being requested over the phone could be conveyed more effectively via electronic means. The county Motor Vehicle division, also part of the Clerk and Recorder's office, used an online chat feature to assist customers. Would a similar solution work for voters?

Elections, led by Jeffco Clerk George Stern and Director Cody Swanson, worked with the IT department to implement a chat feature in time for the June 30, 2020 state primary, giving the team a chance to test functionality as well as hours and staffing levels. To use the service, all a voter had to do was visit the Elections website, VoteJeffco.com, and click on an icon that said "Let's chat." As we expected, voters had an easier time digesting information like vote center maps or registration forms when received via a link as opposed to verbal instructions. By the general election, Jeffco expanded availability of chat, which was so popular it rendered the call center dead on Election Day itself.

**Innovation**
The fact that the Jeffco Elections division had never tried online chat before 2020 is not surprising. It's not as if election administrators are known for being on the cutting edge of technology—with good reason, given that a sacred democratic exercise isn't an ideal environment in which to experiment. However, communicating with voters is a critical objective and our team wanted to ensure we that we took advantage of the most effective ways of doing so.

While online chat was far from a novel concept in the customer service sphere, we weren't aware of any election administrators using the tool to assist voters. And it thus represented a new, original idea in the context of the democratic process.

**Sustainability**
The online chat tool is scalable, which means it can be expanded or contracted based on need. Tawk.to, the company behind the software that Jeffco uses, allows administrators to add as many users/"chat agents" as they like, providing access to a digital dashboard that assigns chats and measures volume. Election call center representatives are able to log in to the chat service

when the phones may be slow; likewise, they can easily sign off if their services are needed elsewhere.

**Outreach Efforts**
To inform the public about the new live chat feature, the Elections team worked with the Clerk and Recorder's Public Affairs staff to promote it on social media and make sure chat hours and instructions were posted prominently on VoteJeffco.com. Clerk George Stern regularly pitched online chat to voters during media appearances and when hosting live video tours of the county's ballot processing center. Additionally, Public Affairs incorporated the Elections chat into an ongoing email marketing campaign that included government officials and community leaders to help spread the word.

**Cost-effectiveness**
Live chat supported by Tawk.to is just about as cost-effective as possible: It's free. The company has additional offerings it provides for an upcharge, but the software itself can truly be used at no cost.

**Replicability**
Any election administrator can replicate Jeffco's online chat feature! Because we used a commercial vendor rather than a native application that only works within our website ecosystem, all that another jurisdiction would need to do is to visit www.Tawk.to and cut and paste the JavaScript code onto their website.

Smaller jurisdictions and/or those lacking resources to hire additional elections judges have the option of paying for chat agents via Tawk.to at the additional rate of $1 per hour. While Elections questions are highly specialized, there is the capability to establish "shortcuts" to requested documents or prepared answers to FAQs ahead of time—something that could at least be used to supplement live representatives.

**Generating Positive Results**
Data shows that people increasingly favor digital communication over traditional methods, and our experience confirmed this. Not only did online chat enable us to distribute registration forms and other documents more easily, but voters also preferred it. During the hours chat was available, the call center saw major drops in call volume. Indeed, on Election Day itself, the call center was dead.

Since the feature is new, additional customer satisfaction metrics are limited at the moment. But voters who received answers in digital form told team members they were less likely to forget or lose the information they were looking for—preventing additional inquiries. And as far as efficiency goes, the Tawk.to dashboard measures the number, frequency and duration of the chats. That empowers Jeffco Elections leadership to more efficiently allocate human resources going forward.