Montgomery County Board of Elections, Maryland

U.S. Election Assistance Commission "Clearies" Submission:
Outstanding Innovations in Elections

Leveraging SMS short codes to facilitate
Voter Information & Empowerment in the time of COVID-19

Introduction

For voters, Election Day is a way to perform their civic duty. For those involved in elections, Election Day marks the long-awaited culmination of tireless efforts to serve and encourage voters to go to the polls. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional methods of community engagement and empowerment were abruptly reduced or eliminated. More than ever, the need to leverage existing technology to engage the electorate was critical. For low-propensity voters, first-time voters, newly Naturalized citizens, or non-native English speakers, the voting process can seem daunting for a normal election. For many, the 2020 Presidential Election was particularly confusing, with voting rules and procedures in a state of constant change.

Montgomery County, Maryland, not only leveraged Zoom, Teams, our newly developed MoCo Votes app and other methods of communicating that served as the new platforms for community engagement during the pandemic, but also made effective use of traditional communications such as direct mail, radio, and television to push voters toward a simple texting short code platform. SMS texting provided County voters with reassuringly simple, straightforward and time sensitive information and service generated hyperlinks.

The Need for Expeditious Implementation

The coronavirus has altered the way many Americans are voting or going to the polls. The shift towards early voting has been going on for years, but the need to vote by mail to mitigate viral exposure has progressed rapidly since this spring's the spring 2020 primaries. Like neighboring states, Montgomery County election administrators via State Emergency Proclamations had to modify established business practices by expanding vote-by-mail resources, consolidating approximately 250 election day precincts into 39 vote centers, modify early voting dates and quickly implementing the installation of 50 ballot drop boxes to supplement USPS community concerns and the surge of voting by mail. More than ever, the need to leverage existing technology to engage the electorate quickly was paramount.

Innovative Uses of Technology

The latest addition to the voter engagement portfolio of the Board of Elections has been the introduction of SMS short code, a partnership with the county's Department of Technology Services. According to the Pew Research Center, on average, American adults send and receive 32 texts per day, totaling 18 billion texts every day, 541 billion texts every month, and 6.5 trillion texts every year (not including children 12 years old and younger). The ability to provide relevant and instantaneous election-focused information is paramount in carrying out County Government's vision towards an "Effective, Sustainable Government". SMS texting provides County voters easy access to information and services without traveling to its main office in Gaithersburg, Maryland, or the need to log into a traditional broadband service at home/work. SMS short codes are a great service tool as they get potential voters to act immediately and improve confidence using familiar technology that is in their hand.

Service in Seconds

Text messaging has proven itself a powerful tool for educating and mobilizing voters. During the 2020 Presidential election cycle, the Montgomery County Board of Elections provided voters a platform to request and/or leverage relevant information within seconds. Additionally, a growing share of County residents now use smartphones as their primary means of online access at home. Today, roughly one in five American adults are "smartphone-only" internet users – meaning they own a smartphone, but do not have traditional home broadband service. With fewer options for online access, many financially restricted County residents are relying more on smartphones. BOE's bilingual SMS short code broadens our reach into the community, the speed in which services are rendered and mitigates common service request made to the office by traditional means such as email and/or calls made to the office. The need to make election information more accessible and to service Montgomery County voters expeditiously via SMS short codes was paramount. As more and more citizens use smart phones to access information, the Board of Elections wanted to find more innovative ways to leverage technology to keep their voters in the loop. The incorporation of SMS short codes broadens the reach to County residents to get voter information out more easily and cheaply. The SMS short codes provide the following services:

The Results/Success of the Program
• Voters adapted quickly to using SMS short codes. The Montgomery County Board of Elections serves fewer than 690,000 registered voters but received over 107,000 requests for information in the 2020 presidential election cycle. The seamless integration of SMS short codes enabled us to share said platform with the Maryland State Board of Elections and neighboring Maryland counties.

• Voters were able to successfully find their vote centers and drop boxes. The presidential primary and general elections went extremely well, with very, very few complaints about difficulty in finding ballot drop boxes or vote centers. This was due in large part to the fact that we made it very easy for voters, candidates, the media, and others who were working to get out the vote to share information, and to equip voters to get information themselves, using the SMS short codes.

• The use of short codes allowed us to provide just-in-time information when voters needed it. Rather than sending voters to a single website to look up information on a cumbersome website or in lengthy FAQs, we were able to direct them to text a simple, easy to remember word to 77788. For example, to check their voter registration, voters were able to text "CHECK" to 77788. To find the nearest drop box, they were able to text "BOX" to 77788. To sign up to serve as a poll worker, they were able to text "SERVE" to 77788. In Spanish, they were able to text "REVISE" or "BUZON" or "SERVIR".

• The program fills gaps in the availability of services and improves the administration of an existing county program. It also enhances the level of citizen participation in and understanding of government programs during the ever-changing election regulation and implementation landscape due to the pandemic.

• The use of separate Spanish language short codes was extremely helpful in communicating to and building trust with many voters in our county. The department has been in compliance with the requirements of Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act since Montgomery County first became subject to the requirements after the 2000 Census. The efforts outlined here are beyond mere compliance with requirements for bilingual translation and display Montgomery County's

creative approach to meeting the needs of a diverse community comprised of voters who speak

many languages and have many different needs.

SMS Short Code Commands

SMS COMMAND		INFO PROVIDED
English	Spanish	
VOTE	VOTA	Allow citizens to register to vote via smart phones
MCVOTES + Address Zip	MCVOTA + Dirección Código Postal	Allows voters to look up and get directions to their polling place
VBM	VPC	Request a vote-by-mail ballot for the upcoming election
EV + Zip Code	VA + Código Postal	Identifies closest early voting centers, provides driving directions, and wait times
SERVE	SERVIR	Allow voters to register to serve as election poll workers
BOX + Zip Code	BUZON + Código Postal	Identifies closest vote-by-mail drop box and provides driving directions
CHECK	REVISE	Allows voters to review and/or update voter record, print sample ballot, request vote-by-mail ballot, register to vote, check the status of their mail-in or provisional ballot
VC + Zip Code	CDV + Código Postal	Identifies closest vote centers, provides driving directions, and wait times

Bus cards

Choose when to vote in 2020! Election information at your fingertips!

REGISTER TO VOTE
DEADLINE
Tuesday, April 7
To register, update your party affiliation or address
Text VOTE to 77788

VOTE EARLY
April 16 - April 23
10 a.m. - 8 p.m.
To identify the three closest Early Voting Centers & wait times
Text EV [Zip] to 77788
Example: EV 20879

VOTE BY MAIL
DEADLINE
Tuesday, April 21
Text VBM to 77788

VOTE ON ELECTION DAY
Tuesday, April 28
7 a.m. - 8 p.m.
To identify your voting precinct
Text MCVOTES [Address Zip] to 77788
Example: MCVOTES 18753 North Frederick Avenue 20879

MONTGOMERY COUNTY BOARD OF ELECTIONS ★ 777VOTE.ORG ★ 240-777-8500 ★ @777VOTE

¡Elige cuando votar en 2020! ¡Información electoral a su alcance!

REGISTRARSE PARA VOTAR EN MARYLAND
FECHA LÍMITE
martes, 7 de abril
Para registrarse, actualizar su afiliación política o dirección domiciliar
Envía VOTA al 77788

VOTE TEMPRANO
16 al 23 de abril
10 a.m. - 8 p.m.
Para identificar los tres centros de votación anticipada más cercanos y los tiempos de espera
Envía mensaje de texto
VA [Codigo Postal] al 77788
Ejemplo: VA 20879

VOTE POR CORREO
FECHA LÍMITE
martes, 21 de abril
Para solicitar una papeleta por correo
Envía VPC al 77788

VOTE EL DÍA DE LAS ELECCIONES
martes, 28 de abril
7 a.m. - 8 p.m.
Para identificar su centro electoral
Envía mensaje de texto
MCVOTA [Dirección Codigo Postal] al 77788
Ejemplo: MCVOTA 18753 North Frederick Avenue 20879

JUNTA ELECTORAL DEL CONDADO DE MONTGOMERY ★ 777VOTE.ORG ★ 240-777-8500 ★ @777VOTE

Voter Registration

DON'T RUN OUT OF TIME!
VOTER REGISTRATION ENDS TOMORROW!
OCTOBER 13
APPLY NOW!
Text VOTE to 77788 or visit 777VOTE.ORG

13 de OCTUBRE...¡FALTAN 2 DÍAS!
¡Se acerca la fecha límite para inscribirse y poder votar!
¡APLICA HOY!
Envía la palabra VOTA por texto al 77788 o visite 777VOTE.ORG

Election Judge/Poll Worker Recruitment

Vote-by-Mail

MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND BOARD OF ELECTIONS
REQUEST YOUR MAIL-IN BALLOT DON'T WAIT!
VOTE
DEADLINE: OCTOBER 20
★ ★ ★ **Text VBM to 77788** ★ ★ ★

JUNTA ELECTORAL DEL CONDADO DE MONTGOMERY
SOLICITE SU PAPELETA POR CORREO
FECHA LÍMITE 20 DE OCT
Envíe por texto las letras VPC al 77788

MONTGOMERY COUNTY BOARD OF ELECTIONS
PRESIDENTIAL GENERAL ELECTION IS NOVEMBER 3

AVOID LONG LINES
Request a Vote-by-Mail Ballot TODAY!
Text VBM To 77788

VOTE HERE! ¡VOTE AQUÍ!

777VOTE.ORG ★ **240-777-8550** ★ **@777VOTE**

EVITE HACER LARGAS FILAS
¡Solicite votar por correo HOY!
Envie por texto las letras VPC al 77788

JUNTA ELECTORAL DEL CONDADO DE MONTGOMERY
ELECCIÓN GENERAL PRESIDENCIAL: 3 de noviembre

Early Voting

Election Day Vote Centers

Ballot Drop Box

Multilingual

Flyers

Montgomery County
BOARD OF ELECTIONS
Junta Electoral del Condado de Montgomery
777VOTE.ORG ★ 240-777-8683 ★ @777VOTE

Get What You Need To Vote!
¡Obtenga lo que Necesita para Votar!
2020 Presidential Elections/Elecciones Presidenciales

Text **VOTE** to 77788
Register To Vote
Inscribese para Votar

Text **VBM** to 77788
Apply To Vote By Mail
Aplique para Votar por Correo

Text **EV [Zip]** to 77788
Example/Ejemplo: EV 20879
**Three Closest
Early Voting Centers**
Identifique los Tres Centros de
Votación Anticipada más Cercanos

Text **MCVOTES [Address Zip]** to 77788
Example/Ejemplo: MCVOTES 18753 North Frederick Avenue 20879
Identify Your Election Day Precinct
Identifique su Recinto el Día de la Elección

Text **HELP** to 77788
Additional information
Para información adicional

< 77788
VOTE
MD Online Voter Registration:
https://voterservices.
elections.maryland.gov/
OnlineVoterRegistration/
InstructionsStep1

Android Platform

Screen 1 (77788):

10:08 AM — BOX 20871

2020 Presidential General Election
Ballot Drop Box & Post Office Locator
Four closest centers
****
Clarksburg High School
22500 Wims Road
 Clarksburg, MD, 20871

Damascus Community Recreation Center
25520 Oak Drive
 Damascus, MD, 20872

Watkins Mill High School
10301 Apple Ridge Roa

View all >

10:08 AM

10:12 AM — Check

Review your voter registration record: https://voterservices.elections.maryland.gov/VoterSearch
10:12 AM

Screen 2 (77788):

9:45 AM — Check

Review your voter registration record: https://voterservices.elections.maryland.gov/VoterSearch
9:45 AM

11:46 AM — VC 20879

Election Day Vote Centers
November 03, 2020 (7:00 AM–8:00 PM)
Three closest vote centers
****
Watkins Mill High School
10301 Apple Ridge Road
 Gaithersburg, MD, 20879
Current Wait Time:1 minutes

Gaithersburg High School
101 Education Boulevard
 Gaithersburg, MD, 20877
Current Wait

View all >
11:46 AM

11:47 AM — VC 2087

Screen 3 (77788):

8:25 PM — BOX 20879

2020 Presidential General Election
Ballot Drop Box & Post Office Locator
Four closest centers
****
Montgomery County Board of Elections
18753 North Frederick Avenue
 Gaithersburg, MD, 20879

Watkins Mill High School
10301 Apple Ridge Road
 Gaithersburg, MD, 20879

Upper County Commu

View all >
8:25 PM

8:25 PM — VOTE

Maryland Voter Registration Application: https://voterservices.elections.maryland.gov/OnlineVoterRegistration/InstructionsStep1
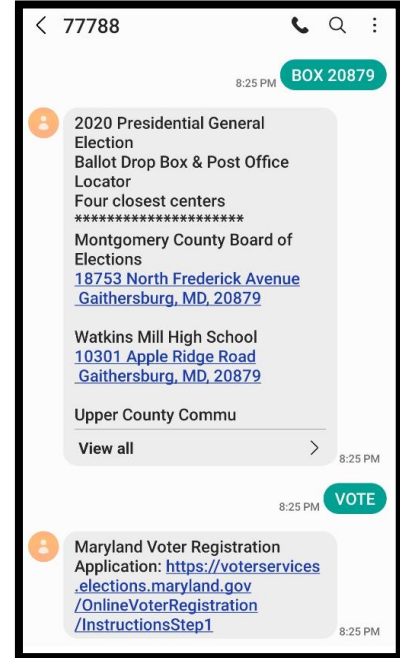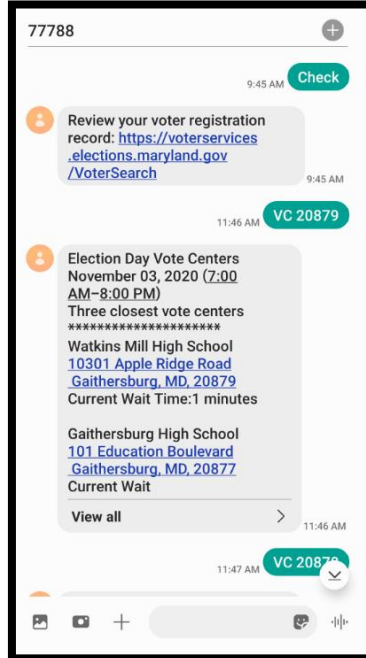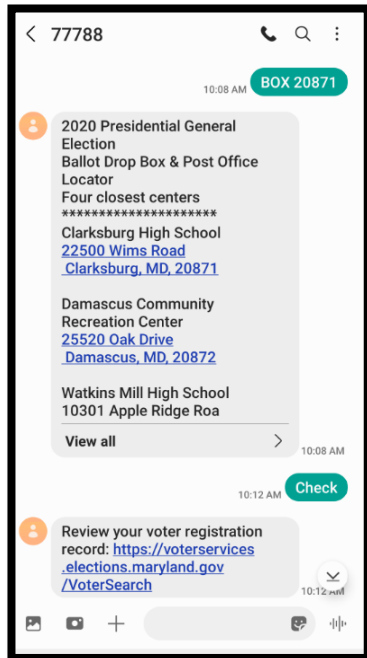8:25 PM

iOS Platform

Screen 1 (77788):

Today 8:10 PM

VOTA

Aplique para Votar en Maryland (Seleccione Español): https://voterservices.elections.maryland.gov/OnlineVoterRegistration/InstructionsStep1

REVISE

Screen 2 (To: 777-88):

VA 20871

Votacion Anticipada para la Eleccion General de 2020
26 de octubre-2 de noviembre (7AM-8PM)
Los tres centros mas cercanos
****
Damascus Community Recreation Center
25520 Oak Drive
Damascus, MD, 20872

Germantown Recreation Center
18905 Kingsview Road
Germantown, MD, 20874

Activity Center at Bohrer

Screen 3 (77788):

BUZON 20871

Elecccion General de 2020
Los cuatro buzones de entrega mas
cercanas y localizador de oficinas de correo
****
Clarksburg High School
22500 Wims Road
 Clarksburg, MD, 20871

Damascus High School
25921 Ridge Road
 Damascus, MD, 20872

Damascus Community Recreation Center
25520 Oak Drive
 Damascus, MD, 20872

Watkins Mill High School
10301 Apple Ridge Road