

“Democracy Heroes” – U.S. Election Assistance Commission Clearinghouse Submission

Best Practices in Recruiting, Retaining and Training Poll Workers

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Brief Summary

By forging community partnerships and piggybacking off of intense public interest in the 2020 elections, the North Carolina State Board of Elections recruited more than 57,000 individuals to help staff early voting sites and Election Day precincts, far exceeding the need for poll workers during the pandemic. Except for staff time and the use of donated social media advertisements, no taxpayer money was spent on the effort we called “Democracy Heroes.”

The “Democracy Heroes” Campaign

Like many states, in early 2020, the North Carolina State Board of Elections prepared for a possible shortage of poll workers due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The recruitment of poll workers is one of the most resource-intensive and stressful parts of an election administrator’s job. Add a pandemic – and longtime workers who did not want to risk getting the virus – and county elections officials were worried that they wouldn’t be able to adequately staff all voting sites.

The estimated average age of a North Carolina poll worker is 65 years old, which put these workers at higher risk for COVID-19, per the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Innovation

In June 2020, to protect our democracy, the State Board of Elections launched the “Democracy Heroes” campaign. (See [press release](#).) We designed the program to ensure each county had enough workers for North Carolina’s 17-day early voting period and Election Day. We hoped to recruit 25,000 to 30,000 elections officials.

We believe that, during the pandemic, those who worked at polling places to ensure a successful election are heroes, just like nurses, doctors and other healthcare workers.

The State Board created the Democracy Heroes Poll Worker Interest Survey, found here:

<http://bit.ly/2Yh8Aj6>.

As applicants poured in, their names and contact information were shared weekly in Excel format with the appropriate county board of elections, which then reached out to these individuals as needed.

Said one county election official: **“Not only did it help with recruiting during a time when we were too busy, but the Excel lists with email addresses were helpful because we could send a group email to many people at once and get replies much faster.”**

Outreach



The State Board frequently promoted the survey on our website, NCSBE.gov, and social media. State Board Executive Director Karen Brinson Bell discussed the program routinely in public speaking engagements with groups such as the NC Black Alliance, NC Association of County Commissioners, and political groups, chambers of commerce and fraternity and sorority alumni chapters.

Importantly, the State Board worked with the North Carolina Office of State Human Resources (NC OSHR) to allow state employees to receive paid community service leave if they served as an election worker (Read more: <http://bit.ly/37GHBST>). County boards reported that some state employees did not know that they had community service leave, and that state troopers, NC Forest Service employees and other state workers answered the call and plan to continue working future elections.

To expand reach, the State Board partnered with high-profile organizations, which shared our hope for successful 2020 elections. The University of North Carolina System sent the survey to students and staff. The State Board partnered with the NC Community College System to target students and staff, especially in rural areas with a need for workers.

The State Board also coordinated with the Carolina Panthers and the Charlotte Hornets to promote the Democracy Heroes campaign.

Countless North Carolina and national news outlets ran stories about the program, including [an editorial by Capitol Broadcasting Company \(CBC\) Opinion](#):

“There is no higher calling in our nation than fulfilling our most basic civic obligation – voting. But now there’s the chance to do even more – and get paid too. Sign up to be a “Democracy Hero” and help people in your community vote. No cape required.”

The State Board used donated Facebook and Instagram advertising credits for targeted Democracy Heroes ads that focused on rural and coastal counties that still needed workers as the election approached. For an overview of the advertisements, go here: <https://bit.ly/2WFhple>.

Positive Results

By October 2020, more than **57,000 North Carolinians** completed the Democracy Heroes survey, far surpassing the need. No county suffered a shortage of poll workers during the 2020 general election, with many reporting long lists of reserves for future elections.

County election directors reported hiring as many as 150 workers through the program, including many younger workers – a new generation of poll workers.

One county election official noted: **“It put us in touch with a whole new group of people who are interested in serving their community. By its nature, the people replying to the online recruitment were more in line with the skillset we were looking for.”**

Some county officials reported that the program saved them time and resources so they could focus on other tasks during the busy election year.

Another county official said: **“It allowed me to send an email to individuals I knew were interested in working as opposed to doing extensive outreach that was always hit or miss.”**

The State Board is proud of the work done to ensure counties could efficiently conduct the election, especially when receiving messages like the one pictured below:



Replicability

With the Democracy Heroes campaign, the State Board mobilized early and used available resources to reach North Carolinians with a passion for serving in elections. In the process, the State Board created effective partnerships that will continue for future elections.

Any state or jurisdiction could easily replicate this program with a simple online survey and the forming of partnerships with interested community groups.

Cost-effectiveness/Sustainability

Except for staff time, **the State Board did not spend a penny to recruit workers through this campaign.** The agency plans to continue using the program whenever needs arise. It's simple, it's free and it has proven to be very successful.