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Recruiting, Training and Retaining Election Workers
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Every election, large or small, carries with it unique challenges. Those challenges can be magnified when introducing new technology and processes. This was certainly the case in the November 2015 General Election, when Hamilton County, Ohio introduced electronic poll books (epoll books) for the first time in a countywide election.

The implementation of epoll books was not a task the Board of Elections took lightly. The process undertaken to bring epoll books to Hamilton County was both long and labor intensive. We anticipated minor technical glitches and a learning curve for the poll workers, which is the reason we introduced the new epoll books in an odd year, when turn-out is typically low. Although many polling locations reported little to no problems, far too many locations reported problems that rose to an unacceptable level. The issues that arose and the subsequent media coverage left an unnecessary black-eye on the Board of Elections and our poll workers. With only four short months between the November Election and Ohio's Presidential Primary Election in March, we needed to resolve the issues quickly. It was essential that we administer a near flawless election in order to restore confidence in the voting process and provide the voters of Hamilton County the a high quality voting experience they deserve.

Resolving the technical glitches proved to be the easier of the two problems to solve. Thorough testing revealed the majority of the problems experienced could be attributed to a hardware defect in the routers the epoll books used to communicate. The defective routers were all replaced, a new, more user-friendly device interface was designed for poll worker use, and our internal system checklists and tests were greatly enhanced.

Resolving the "learning curve" for the poll workers would prove to be far more challenging. It is always difficult to predict and react to how the human element plays into election administration. We decided to attack this challenge by focusing our efforts on two areas that showed a need for improvement: training and recruiting.

We tweaked our training curriculum to provide more "hands-on" breakout sessions, and trained all poll workers on all processes. We developed and instituted a pass/fail test at the end of class. If the poll worker failed the test, he/she could choose to retake the class and test a second time. We implemented "Practice Makes Perfect" program where individual poll workers could gain additional familiarity with the epoll books by scheduling time to come to the board to work with the devices. Staff set-up numerous different voting scenarios and the poll workers were able to practice processing voters over and over again until they were completely comfortable with the process.

Recruiting and retaining poll workers is never an easy task. Add new technology to a group of workers whose average age is in the early seventies and it becomes a herculean task. To accomplish our recruitment and retention goals, we launched two programs: Partners in Democracy and Youth at the Booth.

Our Partners in Democracy program encourages local government agencies and businesses to give their employees a "Day off for Democracy". By giving their employees the day off with pay plus the additional poll worker pay, employees had a financial incentive to work the polls.

In order to develop these recruitment programs, we need to develop personal relationships. Simply sending an email or mailing an informational packet is not enough to convince government and especially business leaders to give a day off with pay to their employees. Our Board created two new full-time recruiter positions to build and maintain these relationships. The Ohio Secretary of State, Jon Husted, is also assisting local boards by assigning a Marketing and Outreach Manager to each board to assist in reaching out to the local business community. Finally, after each election, our Partners in Democracy are presented with a plaque and are publicly recognized on our website and social media outlets.

We also quickly realized we needed to recruit younger poll workers who are familiar with today's technology. To the younger generation, comfortability with wireless devices is almost second nature. We turned to our local high schools for help. Fortunately, Ohio law allows 17 year-old high school seniors to work the polls. This provides a larger pool of high school students from

which we can recruit. This concept is not new to Ohio. Our Youth at the Booth program started in the late 1990's but did not receive much attention. However, the introduction of ipads to the election process has sparked a new interest. Teenagers can see how incredibly valuable their technology skill sets are in the election process. The media loved the story. Every local media outlet in Cincinnati ran at least one news story about the program leading up to the Presidential Primary in March. The Board was able to place a high school senior in 50% of the polling locations in Hamilton County. They received universal praise from their adult counterparts. Our goal is to place one high school senior in every polling location in the upcoming Presidential Election. We hope to unveil a Youth at the Booth Challenge at the start of the school year in order to reach that goal.

These recruitment programs are in no way an effort to phase out older poll workers. To the contrary, they are an effort to build the perfect team. We can pair the younger generation's familiarity with today's technology, the business community's work experience and customer service, and the older generation's knowledge of election procedures to create an ideal group of poll workers. Building a team of poll workers who work well together increases the Board's ability to retain those workers for years to come.

Poll workers are the faces of Democracy. They administer our most precious right as American Citizens, and do so under tremendous pressure. We ask much of those who work the polls. Providing them with the best possible technological tools, and giving them the training and human resources they need to accomplish their goals ensures that our election process runs smoothly and fairly, and our voting rights remain secure.