

# PREPARING FOR IN-PERSON VOTING DURING COVID-19: POLL WORKER RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING



## Lessons Learned from the 2020 Primaries

The loss of experienced poll workers can have ripple effects through the electoral process. As Sherry Poland, Director of Elections of Hamilton County, Ohio, testified to the EAC, “we learned from those states that did hold in-person voting during this pandemic that it’s all about the poll workers.” Whether it is the loss of experience in election operations or a loss of workers at a level that necessitates closing or consolidating voting locations, recruiting, training, and retaining poll workers has been a major thread of 2020 primary elections.

- Prepare to have fewer experienced workers. Conduct early outreach to past election workers to evaluate how many will be available to work in November. Having a sense of the scale of the problem will inform your recruitment efforts.
- Prepare for last minute cancelations. Election officials should anticipate a sudden and last minute drop in the number of available election workers and work to anticipate the need for additional staff.
- Consider offering hazard pay to poll workers if your budget allows.
- States should work with their governor or other applicable state agencies to make sure that unemployed workers who serve as election workers do not lose their unemployment benefits.
- Recruit from nontraditional groups, especially those currently impacted heavily by COVID-19 including hospitality workers, teachers, or workforces that could potentially obtain continuing education credits for training such as lawyers, accountants, or realtors.
- Streamline the application process to make it easy for poll workers to sign up.
- Expand opportunities for non-partisan volunteer groups and businesses to “adopt-a-precinct.”
- Prepare to adjust training for poll workers to include options that meet social distancing guidelines through the use of new locations, PPE, or virtual training.
- Review the EAC [Election Worker Successful Practices](#) manual for further information on recruiting, training, and retaining election workers.

## Preparing for Fewer Repeat Poll Workers

The typical age of a poll worker falls squarely within the most at-risk populations for COVID-19<sup>1</sup>. Due to the continuing outbreak, many experienced poll workers have not served in primaries and may not participate in November. This results in a loss of important election administration experience and

creates an increased need for poll worker training. The reduction in repeat poll workers may become measurable early in the planning process. However, some election officials have reported last minute cancellations or no-shows on Election Day. Election officials will have to anticipate a last-minute drop in the number of available poll workers and work to anticipate the need for additional staff.

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<sup>1</sup> Data collected as part of the Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS) indicated that more than two-thirds of poll workers were over the age of 61 in 2018. Further information is available at [https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/eac\\_assets/1/6/2018\\_EAVS\\_Report.pdf](https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/eac_assets/1/6/2018_EAVS_Report.pdf).

To help address these last minute shortages, some states have waived requirements that election workers reside in the local jurisdiction in which they serve. Many state offices have also created backup teams of workers who can be deployed throughout a state in the event that voting locations find themselves short staffed on Election Day. In some places, these teams have been comprised of off-duty members of the State National Guard.

Here are some examples from election officials:

Jared Dearing, Executive Director of the Kentucky Board of Elections spoke to this issue telling the EAC that “Kentucky is facing a crisis in the retention and recruitment of poll workers. Of the 16,000 poll workers necessary to operate Kentucky polling locations, over 9,000 are older than the age of 65. And over 5,000 are older than the age of 70.” Further, he said, “It was reported to me by several county clerks that less than 10 percent of their poll workers were willing to work on Election Day. This will become exacerbated in November as turnout is expected to be record highs and experienced poll workers will be desperately needed.”

Lynn Bailey, Director of the Board of Elections in Richmond County, Georgia faced similar challenges, testifying to the EAC, “Poll workers canceling out left and right here left some locations with very, very few experienced poll workers.” Thomas Lund, a municipal clerk in Madison, Wisconsin faced this issue stating, “[w]e’ve lost between one third and 40% of our [poll] workforce. Just, people who can’t take the health risks. They will be back after COVID.”

Dianna Moorman, Director of Elections in James City County, Virginia noted a large drop in the final hours saying “[w]e did have a 10 percent attrition rate from our election officers that did not show up within 24 hours of elections of the actual Election Day.”

## Recruiting New Poll Workers

Election officials facing a large deficit in experienced poll workers are turning to proven methods of recruitment as well as using innovative programs to meet their poll worker needs through partnerships with other officials and the public. Some examples from around the country include:

Officials in both Orange County, Florida, and Washoe County, Nevada, allow for the “adoption” of a voting location. The [program](#) has been used since 1998 in Orange County to ensure a full staffing of voting locations as community groups or businesses commit to working a voting location together on behalf of their business or organization. This [program](#) is available beginning in the 2020 elections in Washoe. Other counties are currently considering these options, including James City County, Virginia as an option to increase the workforce.

Delaware recommends streamlining the recruitment of state employees to fill poll worker gaps in 2020. Previously, Delaware state employees would indicate an interest in serving as a poll worker and then be contacted to complete an application form which would then be sent to the appropriate county. In 2020, the Department of Elections created an application which could be completed online and immediately sent to their county, removing a step within their previous recruitment system. State Election Commission Anthony Albence credits the streamlined system with increased response rates stating “If we’re asking for their help we should make it easier for them. It yields a lot more results.”

States including [California](#) and [Florida](#) also encourage government employees to serve as poll workers or are making that request for 2020. Seminole County, Florida, has worked to directly recruit from within the government to prevent a potential shortage of poll workers in 2020. Supervisor of Elections Chris Anderson reported, “another measure that our office has adopted to cope with a COVID-19 election cycle is to reach out to local government partners--the other constitutional offices in the county--to borrow personnel to help the office staff and serve as election workers.” The office sent flyers to the offices of the Sheriff, Clerk, Tax Collector, and Property Appraiser for distribution to their employees in the hopes of recruiting new poll workers for November. Other intergovernmental recruitment techniques

included recruiting off-duty members of the National Guard to serve as poll workers in [Nebraska](#), Kentucky, and [Wisconsin](#), and distributing hand sanitizer in Iowa.

Barbara Goeckner Deputy Clerk of Cambridge, Wisconsin, utilized National Guard staff during the last minute confusion of what she described as an “ever changing” election. Due to last a minute court decision she explained “at approximately at 8 p.m. the night before the election it was decided by the courts the election would go forward at 7 a.m. the next morning.” The decision resulted in a rapidly approaching absentee deadline as “[v]oters who didn’t hear that late decision went to bed thinking that they had another week to get their ballots returned to the clerks,” when in reality it was due the next day. Utilizing the National Guard as temporary phone bankers, the elections office made calls to all absentee voters at their known phone numbers to inform them of the deadline that day.

The Virginia Department of Elections worked with both the Governor and the State Department of Education to send letters to all state employees, college presidents, and school superintendents, as well as their National Guard, to encourage those workers to serve as election workers. This one method of outreach yielded over 1,500 applications. Virginia also worked with the state’s Medical Reserve Corps, a nationwide program founded after 9/11, to have those volunteers help clean voting locations and maintain social distancing so that election workers could focus on administering the election.

Consider offering hazard pay or working with your government partners to allow government employees to receive pay for serving as poll workers if they are currently required to volunteer unpaid. Clark County, Nevada has utilized county workers as the team leaders at voting locations since 1994 but was unable to pay these workers. Due to the COVID pandemic these crucial workers will now be eligible for pay and comp time for agreeing to serve in 2020. Additionally the county will be increasing all worker’s pay by \$50 due to COVID in an effort to recruit an adequate number of workers.

Officials can also look to other potential populations to recruit members of currently underworked professions. Madison, Wisconsin has recruited bartenders, a workforce that the Clerk licenses, to serve as poll workers for the past five years. The use of bartenders as poll workers helps to diversify their poll worker population and supplies voting locations with a workers that are familiar with reviewing state identification as a part of their regular job. Richmond County, Georgia recruited medical and cyber professionals from the nearby Georgia University Medical Center and Georgia Cyber Center.

Student and educator populations have also been heavily recruited to bridge the gap of necessary poll workers<sup>2</sup>. James City County, Virginia utilized 16 and 17 year olds as “pages” for the primary election, allowing them to receive service credit for working at a voting location under the supervision of the Chief Election Officer. Richmond County, Georgia has an ongoing partnership with the Georgia Board of Education to recruit student and teacher poll workers. Richmond County specifically recruited high school juniors in the hopes of retaining them as poll workers in their senior year this November.

Hamilton County, Ohio took a multilayered approach. They have expanded their “Partners in Democracy” program to recruit poll workers from local government agencies and local businesses and have received a commitment from a local Fortune 500 company to give employees the day off to serve as poll workers in November. They are establishing a new program entitled “Devoted to Service” to recruit members of nonprofits to serve together. Simultaneously they are running a “Youth at the Booth Challenge” to provide a pizza party to the local high school that recruits the most student poll workers.

Similarly, Paul Pate, Secretary of State of Iowa, outlined a robust recruitment program in Iowa including groups interested in voting, the National Guard, teachers and high schools, and city and county employees. Secretary Pate stressed the importance of early recruitment stating, “the sooner we have those poll workers identified, the sooner our

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<sup>2</sup> For more information, please visit [EAC Election Worker Successful Practices](#).

county jurisdictions will know how many polling sites they can staff. If you don't have the people, you can't staff those sites.”

## Training New Poll Workers

Initial reports of malfunctioning machines or voting issues are often later found to be the result of poll workers not understanding a process. Poll worker training will take on an elevated importance in 2020 due to the recruitment of inexperienced poll workers. Social distancing guidelines may require the development of virtual training programs.

Seminole County, Florida is one of many counties tailoring their training to the populations they serve. The county is offering training in-person in large spaces to allow for social distancing and the use of PPE as well as online training through utilizing an online meeting platform. Supervisor of Elections Chris Anderson stated “in-person training is for newer election workers. Online training is for more experienced workers who are already familiarized with the equipment. To be eligible for Zoom training, workers have to have served in two of the most recent elections.”

Other states including [Colorado](#), [Indiana](#), and [Texas](#) are offering online training for poll workers. Chicago, Illinois is currently researching interactive online training to verify that the workers have engaged with the training. These programs will help to ensure that more poll workers, including those appointed right before and/or on Election Day, will receive proper training.