

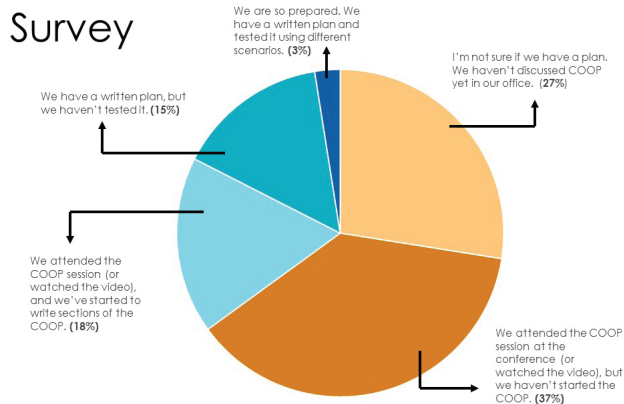
Building Statewide Resilience

Through Emergency Management of Elections

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What is a COOP? When election services are interrupted by an emergency, a Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP) is a blueprint for how to become operational again. Through our partnerships with Washington’s elected County Auditors and our state’s Department of Enterprise Services, we provided training, templates, and technical expertise (the 3 T’s) to improve Washington State’s ability to serve voters amidst interruptions or major crises. We are committed to protecting the democratic process while also encouraging participation—even in the face of a disaster.

TIP 1 - Assess your needs. We sent a brief online survey to each county elections department. We asked them to describe their emergency preparedness plans. Did the department have an elections-specific plan? How could we support their efforts? One survey question asked about their preferred time of year to attend an in-person regional workshop. Then, we identified the level of support needed in each county and developed our training plan accordingly.



TIP 2 - Find a rockstar. While we have election expertise, we knew we had to find a qualified emergency management expert (or team) to help us provide quality, inspired training. We reached out to numerous state and local emergency management offices. Ultimately, we found our expert by making many, many contacts until we found the right person at the right price (free!). Until we found our rockstar, we were told “No,” by legions of people. *Tip 2* could also be entitled, “Never, ever give up.”



TIP 3 - Prepare to blend. We blended a variety of experts to meld emergency preparedness with election preparation. Our training plan blended online webinars, in-person regional workshops, and one-to-one technical support. In addition to the COOP training series, we featured expertise from county election departments at our statewide elections conferences. We also blended work and home—encouraging a *culture of preparedness* both professionally and personally. Our seasoned rockstar taught us that if we (civil servants) don’t prepare for an emergency at home, then we won’t be at work when we’re needed the most.



Team of trainers conducting an online webinar in an interactive talk show style. (below - Miriam Campbell, Cristina Labra, Lori Augino; above - Bob Bippert, Rockstar)

County election departments often lack adequate support from their small, underfunded emergency management divisions who typically have other priorities. We're confident Washington State could improvise and overcome adversity, but we asked ourselves, "Wouldn't we rather have a plan?"

TIP 4 - Find a template and start writing! FEMA publishes a comprehensive template that's a great starting point. However, during a crisis, are you going to pore over an enormous and possibly outdated binder of materials? What you really need in that moment is an actionable checklist, so you don't forget something (or someone!). Our rockstar taught us that managers don't want to study a huge emergency plan, but they will follow a simple checklist. We encouraged participants to start the necessary brainstorming using either the federal template or a matrix recommended by one of our counties. Then, we introduced the concept of checklists for each essential function and worked through them together at a workshop. Whatever template you choose, it's important to just start writing! In an emergency, it's easy to forget important things when you're under pressure. Writing your COOP *before* a crisis occurs allows you to make solid decisions without the stress.



Tip 4 could also be entitled, "Make it yours." While it's silly to reinvent the wheel, it's very important to roll up your shirt sleeves and tailor a plan to suit your unique operation. We provided templates and training for election departments to write their own COOPs, but ultimately, they did all the work! By design, we did not provide sample plans to merely copy and paste. The truth is, no one else can write your COOP.

TIP 5 - Walk the talk. Recently, our office had its own Election Day emergency. A state construction crew cut a cable which hosts the service for uploading results. Instead of trying to remember what to do and who to contact first, we pulled out the checklist of reminders we developed for this type of interruption. It worked! You can't plan for every type of scenario (and you shouldn't), but you *can* devise a checklist that assumes the worst has occurred, and then build the steps for recovery. Finally, we made COOP planning a priority for our own office. It seemed appropriate to set an example for our county partners while also creating a stronger election process statewide.

COOP Scoop.

All templates & presentations for the COOP Certificate Program are available on our Washington Election Administrators website:

[Training Materials & Videos.](#)

TIP 6 - Share the love. Our goal is to develop and exercise plans that help us help each other in the face of adversity. Each elections department that completed our "COOP Certificate Program" was acknowledged in a public awards ceremony by Washington Secretary of State Kim Wyman, at our annual elections conference. If this seems like a "carrot" to motivate election officials, the greater good was definitely served--54% of our counties now have election-specific COOPs and 72% of all counties who participated in the training program finished their plans. In addition to the certification, *every* county received a waterproof flash drive containing all the completed plans (including our own!).

