Quick Start Guide

Central Count System

*Helping America **Vote***

About the Quick Start Guides: The EAC's Quick Start Guides are intended to familiarize local election officials with various topics they will likely encounter in election administration. The guides are a starting point to identify areas of concern and give officials a broad idea of factors they should consider in approaching a given topic.

What is a Central Count System?

In a central count system, election officials use a high-speed ballot scanner or several precinct scanners to tabulate Election Day ballots at a central location. At the polling place, voters cast their ballots by depositing them into secure ballot boxes, which poll workers transport to the central count location at the close of the polls. This guide will highlight considerations and administrative practices election officials should consider when implementing a central count optical scan ballot system.

Making the Decision

The decision on central count versus precinct count of ballots may be statutory, but local election officials may have flexibility in the decision. Deciding whether to change to a central count optical scan ballot system requires careful consideration of a jurisdiction's internal and external environments. Election officials must manage the transition to central counting in a way that minimizes the impact of the change on election processes while preserving the security and integrity of the electoral system. Some key factors to consider include:

- **Voter Intent Determinations:** Similar to mail ballots, a voter is not present during the review and tabulation of their ballot. The use of central count ballot scanners requires officials to develop bipartisan ballot adjudication procedures for ensuring a voter's cast ballot counts as they intended (voter's intent).
- **Voter Education:** Establish voter education programs to provide information about the chain of custody, security of transportation of ballots from the polling place, and how voters can track and confirm that their ballot counted.
- **Blank Ballots, Overvotes, and Undervotes:** Similar to voter intent determinations, officials must determine how to program scanners to read ballots that are blank, overvoted, or undervoted.
- **Staffing:** Central count operations require additional staff at the election office. Staff must receive and account for all ballot boxes containing voted ballots, including documenting the chain of custody as the voted ballots are removed from each box, counted, and balanced to the signed voter roster; reviewed for voter intent; bundled into batches, scanned, and re-boxed; and sealed for storage.
- **Cost:** High-speed central ballot scanners are more expensive than precinct-based ballot scanners, but fewer are required.

Polling Place Considerations

Once officials decide to purchase and implement a central count optical scan ballot system, review current polling place processes to identify areas that will require revision or new policies and procedures. Addressing these needs in advance will help poll workers effectively manage the system on Election Day. Jurisdictions changing from DREs to optical scan central count will need sufficient time to revise poll worker manuals, checklists, supplies, and training procedures.

A few important considerations for polling location procedures include:

- Ballot boxes must be secured to ensure the safety and integrity of the ballots at all times.
- Poll workers should inspect the ballot box before the opening of the polls to confirm that the ballot box is empty and then apply a seal and lock to the box to ensure no tampering occurs throughout the day.
- Ballot boxes must be monitored throughout the day to prevent tampering and guide voters to deposit their ballots in the box properly.
- After the polls close, poll workers will have to open the ballot box, manually count the ballots, and balance the number of ballots to the voter list.
- An audit log containing the ballot count should be placed in or on the ballot box with the ballots when sealed for transport.
- Once all end-of-night processes are complete and election supplies are ready to be transported back to the election office, procedures must ensure the security and integrity of the ballot boxes are not compromised at any point in the delivery.

Transporting Ballots

Incorporate two-person, preferably bipartisan, integrity security measures at all times during the delivery process. Tracking devices, such as Airtags or RFDI chips, can be affixed to ballot containers to track ballots during transport to the central count location. Body cameras can also be used to confirm the integrity of the chain of custody of ballots in transport.