

Testimony of Maggie Toulouse Oliver, Bernalillo County Clerk, to the Presidential Commission on Election Administration

August 8, 2013 – Denver, Colorado

Good Morning. Chairmen Bauer and Ginsberg; Distinguished Members of the Commission; fellow election officials; academics and members of the public, my name is Maggie Toulouse Oliver and I am the elected County Clerk and Chief Election Officer in Bernalillo County, New Mexico.

Bernalillo County is located in the north-central region of New Mexico and encompasses the Albuquerque Metropolitan area. A majority-minority, ethnically and culturally diverse area, with both urban and rural populations, Bernalillo County is home to 662,000 individuals and approximately 432,000 voters. Among the state's 33 counties, Bernalillo County alone accounts for approximately 1/3 of the state's voting populous.

I have served as chief election officer for Bernalillo County for 6 ½ years and I am proud to say that we have made enormous strides in election administration during that time.

Today, I plan to focus my testimony on the great success of the 2012 election cycle, in which my staff and I implemented Vote Centers to improve efficiency, streamline costs and vastly improve the overall voting experience for voters in my community. In short, we were able to consolidate over 400 individual precincts into 69 locations county-wide, reduce our Election Day poll-worker needs by 2/3, save \$1m over the course of the election year and receive feedback that well-over 90% of the voters were happy and satisfied with the new voting experience.

Before I get into some detail on the vote center process, I want to briefly discuss the path we traveled to arrive at this new way of implementing elections.

With each election cycle since I came to office, we've worked to improve the process. With the advent of paper ballots in late 2006 came great challenges and opportunities and so, after trying one election cycle using pre-printed ballots, in 2010 we implemented "Ballot on Demand," or the use of electronic pollbooks combined with the printing of ballots right at our early voting sites.

Let me briefly touch on Early Voting in New Mexico and Bernalillo County. The success of our election process is heavily dependent on Early Voting. Beginning 28 days before the election, a voter can cast an in-person ballot at county clerk's offices across the state and beginning 2 Saturdays before the election, they can vote in-person at satellite sites across each county.

In Bernalillo County, we use 17 total sites, which is 2 more than required by statute and we keep our early voting sites open 12 hours a day, Monday – Saturday. While this is challenging in terms of staffing, we find it invaluable in providing a great convenience to the public, in addition to improving our ability

to successfully administer the voting process, as in 2012, over 70% of ballots in Bernalillo County were cast before Election Day

And so, with the use of “Ballot on Demand” at our early voting locations, and the knowledge that we could potentially successfully implement such a system on Election Day, I advocated for the passage of legislation in 2011 that would allow for bringing the convenience of countywide Early Voting to Election Day itself.

Immediately after the legislation took effect in 2011, my team and I undertook rigorous research; we traveled to neighboring states to observe smaller-scale vote-center elections; engaged in widespread community outreach, including stakeholder meetings and public forums; and drafted an extensive background and implementation plan.

I’d like to briefly walk you through how Vote Centers have been implemented in Bernalillo County. As a statutory basis, we are required to locate 1 vote center within each 10 contiguous geographic precincts. We may then overlay our early voting locations. Further, after soliciting feedback, my staff and I also added additional sites based on geographic and voter-turnout considerations.

We utilize primarily public schools – especially high schools – as Election Day vote centers for a number of reasons, including their proximity to major thoroughfares, their geographic distribution, ADA compliance and the availability of space and parking. This, of course, brings the additional challenge of coordinating with the schools, but the Albuquerque Public Schools administration and staff were willing and cooperative partners in this effort, who went above and beyond to accommodate our needs.

In addition to having conveniently-located and a geographically wide-spread coverage of polling locations, it was necessary implement the ballot-on-demand technology I mentioned earlier at every polling location on Election Day. This required a detailed and coordinated effort among IT staffs. There was extensive evaluation and testing, planning and implementation done to ensure that all sites would be operational on Election Day, that backup systems were in place in case of a loss of internet connectivity and that sites could continue to process voters in the event of backup failure.

The sites were all securely interconnected, preventing double voting and ensuring that voter records were flagged the voter was issued a ballot.

Despite our extensive planning, the system could not have worked without a robust voter education campaign and some key voting information tools. Our office utilized some of the \$1m in cost savings to implement the award-winning voter education campaign, which included TV, radio and internet ads, billboards and direct mail to every registered voter.

Further, we implemented our “My Voter Information” internet tool, which allows voters to log-in to receive customized voting information including detailed personal voter registration data;

representative districts and links; a sample ballot; and information about how and where to cast a ballot closest to the voter either by absentee, early or on Election Day.

For in-person voters we also offered the “My Vote Center” app for mobile devices, which provides maps and directions to the polling location nearest the voter at any point in time.

Additionally, both “My Voter Information,” and the “My Vote Center” app listed wait times for both Early and Election Day polling locations, allowing voters to plan ahead of time which location they wanted to visit.

I should mention this wait-time feature was also crucial to the implementation of Election Day vote centers, because it allowed both us as administrators to help direct traffic, as well as the voters to avoid locations with lengthier lines and go close-by to other locations with shorter waits.

As in past years, in 2012 my office once again partnered with the University of New Mexico Political Science Department to conduct a 360-degree assessment of the election and its administration. Professor Lonna Atkeson’s report¹ on the implementation of the election provided my office with both anecdotal as well as data-driven feedback with which to continue our fine-tuning of the vote center process in Bernalillo County. I am hopeful also that this report can help guide other jurisdictions in New Mexico as well as elsewhere in the country as they attempt to implement streamlined and convenient voting processes in their communities.

Among other things, the report assessed voter feedback through a random public opinion survey of registered voters in Bernalillo County. Some highlights of the report show that: voters in Bernalillo County experienced *on average* a 5.2 minute wait before receiving their ballot; 92% knew they could vote at *any* polling location on Election Day; 97% stated that voting at a Vote Center was *better* than voting at their traditional Election Day precinct and 82% of voters called voting at a Vote Center “easy.”

I feel confident by the wide variety of measures obtainable that we made the right move in Bernalillo County by shifting to vote centers on Election Day. While I’d caution that vote centers may not be right for every community, I also think that by extensive planning and coordination, many of the locations that may have experienced problems with traditional election management or vote centers in the past could realize successful implementations moving forward. Further, many of the tools and planning processes that my staff and I utilized in 2012 can be replicated just about anywhere.

Once again, Chairmen Ginsburg and Bauer, and members of the commission, I humbly thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the great things we are doing in Bernalillo County, New Mexico, and I will gladly stand for any questions you may have.

¹ Report available at: <http://polisci.unm.edu/common/documents/c-sved/papers/BernCoFinalReport.pdf>