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Todd D. Valentine
Co-Executive Director
Robert A. Brehm
Co-Executive Director

40 NORTH PEARL ST. STE5
ALBANY, N.Y. 12207-2729
Phone: 518/474-6367 Fax: 518/486-4546
website: www.elections.ny.gov

Testimony of Todd Valentine, Co-Executive Director
of the New York State Board of Elections
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Good morning, my name is Todd Valentine and I'm one of the Co-Executive Directors of the New York State Board of Elections. I've been with the State Board since 1997, and the Co-Executive Director since 2008. And I currently serve as the Treasurer for the National Association of State Election Directors.

This panel has been asked here to speak about disaster preparedness. Unfortunately, New York State has had its share of disasters that have impacted the election process. Most recent was the hurricane Sandy, but before that was the flooding from Irene that devastated sections of upstate New York and before that, of course, September 11th was on the day of our primary election.

One of the critical things we've learned is that a key role for those outside of the disaster area is to help establish lines of communication between the elections officials themselves and whoever else they need to talk with – police and fire departments, power companies, highway departments – all depending on what hurdle they are facing at the moment. And the poll workers and of course, the voters.

We're not "first responders". I don't think we're even "second responders". We're there to help put Humpty Dumpty back to together. We're there to help connect people to put the pieces back together and run the election. And bridging that gap to help those running the election talk to each other is a critical function. At the end of the day, elections are about people, both those running the election and those voting. Providing a human contact, even if just by phone, and reminding them that there are people to help and support them. It helps to tell them, they'll get through it. There's a lot of psychological support. The people you are speaking to have been through a traumatic event. And you're asking them to push forward and hold an election.

Sometimes it takes a little tough love. When we had the flooding from Irene, one of our counties gets on the phone and asks when are we going to postpone the election to. The storm hit about a week before the election. Our answer was clear and unequivocal – you're holding this election on the original date. They said we need to think about it. A few minutes later the county sheriff calls and starts down the same postponement path – and we said we can't postpone the election. In over two hundred years we've only had one election postponed and that was 9-11 which was on the day of the election. The Sheriff gets the elections people on the phone and starts asking them what he can do to help. And from then on we worked to get the local board of elections what they needed. And they pulled it off.

The lesson that I took away from that is to remember that you're talking with people in crisis. They've had their lives disrupted, property destroyed, and sadly, in the worst cases, injuries or loss of loved ones. They can be in a state of shock. And for a lot of things, you can just delay, fix the damage and get on with life. But the importance of holding regular scheduled elections as a bedrock principle comes through in a crisis. We're going to hold that election. And we do. Even after 9-11, it was only a matter of a few weeks and we rescheduled the election, and held the general election on time

The hard part is the initial contact. People in the disaster zone aren't thinking about elections. And what we have learned to do is to not wait for the local official to call you, we call them, before the storm if possible, or immediately afterwards to set up times to start talking. And we've found that people can get always seem to get to telephones. The internet may be down, and the fax machine flooded, but the cell network generally holds up.

So at first we set up a series of calls, we provide an 800 number conference line for people to dial into. It gives them one number to call. We do the work of bringing others to them. Usually three calls a day to start – morning, noon and end of day. To assess the situation and then see who needs to be contacted to get what is needed to address the crisis.

For example, during Sandy we were able to get the power companies in the NYC metro area to talk to the local boards of election and try to put polling sites on the priority lists for restoring power. And also to get the local boards to understand that the hospitals and health care facilities were going to be a priority too. But having knowledge about whether power would be restored allowed the Boards to work out contingency plans for either moving poll sites or trying to bring in generators.

During Irene we were able to help the local boards to coordinate shuttles to help voters get through areas that were difficult to travel over.

And in the aftermath of 9-11 we helped bring the parties together to set up a new primary election and to keep the county boards informed about the process.

It'd be great to have a whole back up fleet of election machines and staff that could swoop in and take over the job, but there simply just isn't enough people or machines. We have over 15,000 polling places staffed by 60,000 workers on a statewide election. We try to get people to think in terms of not what they need, but rather what can they do without, and then work to provide the minimum. And as facilitators we're there to be supportive in running an election that has been disrupted. At the end of the day, we need to find a way to make this work.