Election Practices, Tips, and Techniques

as implemented by election administrators in Washington State

This desktop reference tool is designed to promote reflection and evaluation of election practices.

Welcome

- **This training is a collaborative effort** developed by the OSOS Elections Division, County Auditors and County Election Departments of Washington State. To advance through the slides, click ▶ or topics .

- **To receive 2 credit hours towards administrator certification**, review each topic (on the wheel) and then send your essay responses for the "assignment" to ctsupport@sos.wa.gov.

What is a best practice?

- **County election departments** have implemented various techniques and methods that, through experience or research, have proven to reach a desired result.

- **The OSOS Elections Division** has been asked to assemble these techniques into a reference tool for the 2012 Elections Conference. We've collected these methods through facilitated discussions at trainings and from observing county procedures during election cycles.

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Common Challenges

Understaffing and inadequate facilities are the most common challenges observed in election reviews.

The conversion to all mail elections has been of great benefit to the state and individual counties. However, in many cases, counties continue to use the same number of staff and the same ballot processing space as before the switch.

Common Challenges
Staffing

- Hire and train extra staff early — do not underestimate the **volume** of voters you will see in your office, especially in a Presidential Election. Voter turnout in 2008 was 84.61%.

- In 2012, many counties are training seasonal staff early to answer phones so that permanent staff can focus on election procedures.

- When processing ballots, staff should not be interrupted by other County Auditor responsibilities such as helping customers at the counter or answering phones.

Common Challenges
Work Area

- Do you see space that could be repurposed for 2012? Look at your workspace critically. Procure extra space, if possible.

- One county is repurposing a storage closet as a phone bank for seasonal staff. Another county is repurposing an "extra" break room for ballot processing.

- Ballot processing areas work well when separated from other parts of the office.

- Create space for each step of the process. A linear pattern for processing ballots supports an accurate and transparent process. A non-linear process invites mistakes by staff and confuses observers.

Voter Registration

- Turn up the volume! In preparation for in-person registrations 28-8 days prior to the election, some counties will open locations other than the County Auditor's Office to manage the increased number of voter registrations. All locations must be included in the Notice of Election. Include dates and times.

- Train local groups on how to do voter registration drives and encourage electronic registration.

Candidate Filing

- Several counties have begun to schedule a single three-day filing period immediately after the Primary. This allows a filing period for all voids and vacancies at the same time.

- Send a monthly email to your local jurisdictions to maintain an updated list of contacts. This will strengthen communication with those districts.

Candidate Filing

- Design a PowerPoint presentation which trains PCO candidates how to file online. PDF the presentation and post it to your website.

- Save a stamp… Use digital signatures and mail merge to issue Certificates of Election to PCOs electronically.

Ballots

Ballots & Forms

- In response to the likely decrease in US Postal facilities next year, counties are getting the message out now to return ballots **before** Election Day**.**

- Counties are implementing a comprehensive approach to design. Not only are they using D4D principles on their ballots, but also on forms, outreach publications and signage for deposit boxes.

- More and more, counties are utilizing focus groups and usability testing to gain valuable feedback when testing a new design.

Ballots

Pre-testing

- Keep an assortment of various types and colors of pens to pre-test tabulation equipment. Sensitivity testing may reveal marks that the tabulator can't read.

- For digital tabulation systems, reserve some of the test ballots to process during the official L&A. Demonstrating the scanning and resolving process provides observers with a clear picture of the entire process and promotes transparent elections.

Ballots

Ballot Processing

- From the moment of ballot intake, reconciliation begins. Most counties reconcile ballots daily. Reconciling daily will greatly reduce the time needed to prepare final reconciliation for certification. Daily reconciliation reveals discrepancies before they're too late to correct.

- Counties designate pen colors in ballot processing areas that tabulators will not read. Use of distinctive ink colors (i.e. red, orange, or pink) provides additional assurance of proper ballot management and assures observers your staff is not making marks that tabulators will read.

Ballots
Ballot Processing

- Require all seasonal staff to participate in voter intent and ballot processing training prior to every election. No exceptions.

- Make copies of the *Statewide Standards of What is a Vote* available to all members of your ballot processing team and refer to it frequently. If a ballot issue falls into one of the rules, the ballot may not need to be sent to the County Canvassing Board.

- Try this training tool! Create a "cheat sheet" of common marks made by voters. Mark a sample ballot with common voter intent issues and write-in scenarios. Laminate and make available in processing area.

Ballots

UOCAVA

- Are you prepared to process large numbers of emailed and faxed voted ballots, federal write-in ballots, and federal postcard applications? Put these procedures in writing.

- Do your instructions show the voter how to return the ballot electronically, with a "ballot privacy sheet" *between* the declaration and ballot?

- Set up a dedicated email account that will receive voted e-ballots. Establish procedures for checking the inbox regularly.

Canvassing Boards

- Notify members now of Canvassing Board meeting dates.   Often members' calendars fill up quickly. Giving them the meeting dates at least a year in advance can help make sure all members attend.

- Try projecting ballot images during meetings. Several counties have started projecting the image of ballots in question on a screen. Not only does this allow all members of the Board to view the ballot at the same time, but also allows meeting attendees to see the ballot in question.

Canvassing Boards

- The Open Public Meetings Act requires that the decision of every meeting be recorded and kept for the applicable retention period. Meeting minutes must be available upon request.

- Do you document every decision? As part of the meeting minutes, the decision for each ballot or group of ballots should be included. Each ballot sent to the Canvassing Board should be tracked. Try organizing ballots by category and unique tracking numbers. This will allow staff to accurately track which specific ballots are sent to the Canvassing Board, for what reason, and the final determination.

Canvassing Boards

- Make it an annual practice to get all Canvassing Board members to delegate duties to the County Auditor. Be sure new members are included.

- A very common mistake found in election reviews is the lack of delegation of duties to the County Auditor. Any Canvassing Board responsibility conducted by the County Auditor needs to be included in the written delegation and signed by each Canvassing Board member.

- If your board designates an alternate, confirm that the replacement is authorized.

Deposit Sites

- Try increasing the number of deposit sites in your county. With the reduction in postal facilities and mail pickups, it's even more important to provide ballot drop boxes, especially for last minute voters.

- Set up staff to secure sites at exactly 8:00 pm. Cell phone time, while not foolproof, is more accurate than personal watches.

- **Plan for volume**. Do you have enough staff to cover all your drop sites on Election Night? How will you handle long lines at 8 pm? Will a law enforcement officer be needed?

Deposit Sites

- Voters must be prevented from placing additional ballots in the box beyond the deadline. A numbered seal enables counties to prove that no additional ballots were cast after 8 pm.

- Do you have a tool that **tracks** when ballot drop boxes are emptied? Some counties have added procedures to verify a "second time" that all boxes are empty prior to certification. There have been multiple instances when voted ballots from previous elections have been discovered in drop boxes (and storage cabinets), too late to be counted.

Voting Centers

- Use DREs for replacement ballots (not provisional ballots.)   Voters who arrive at a voting center, looking for a replacement ballot, should be offered to use the DRE. Verify the original ballot was not returned.

- Print declarations on separate sheets or cards to break the link to votes cast on a DRE. While it is permissible to have voters sign a log out of order, declarations on separate sheets of paper are more easily shuffled out of order to protect voter secrecy.

topics

Voting Centers

- Many counties use sample ballots for provisional ballots. Sample ballots meet the requirements of RCW 29A.36.115 of being visually distinguishable from other ballots and incapable of being tabulated.

- If a voter from another Washington county needs a provisional ballot, check to see if the voter's county has provided a ballot under MyBallot. If not, check for the sample ballot on the county's website. Print the ballot with the correct candidates and issues for the voter and provide envelopes. Send the ballot to the voter's county as soon as possible.

Security

- Start early! From the beginning of ballot preparation, use a seal and log system to document access to sensitive election materials. Detailed documentation will demonstrate access to the materials in question.

- Who *really* has access to your ballots? Ballot storage areas should only be accessed by authorized elections staff.

Security

- Ballots should either be securely sealed during transport or accompanied by at least two people at all times.

- Ballots should not be left unattended. Lock and seal ballots during breaks and lunch, when stopping to help customers, and performing other office duties.

Observers

- How many observers do I need? When planning your work space, plan for at least two observers, one from each party, for each part of your ballot process.

- Are you certain that each piece of your process can be observed? A common complaint from observers, especially in a close election or recount, is they cannot observe ballot processing from start to finish.

- Provide written "observer guidelines" in advance.

Retention

- Where is your copy of the retention schedule? Understand the public disclosure laws and be able to locate the retention period of your election documents.

- Holding on to out-of-date materials or documents is an invitation to errors and/or confusion. Require staff to follow the County Auditor's retention schedule and dispose of documents and supplies after the retention period has passed.

USPS

- Develop a good relationship with your local and state USPS representatives. These representatives can provide you with valuable information to ensure your mailings are correctly delivered.

- Does your election mail qualify for nonprofit status? Contact your USPS representative to determine if your mailing meets nonprofit requirements.

- Election officials have been allowed to use nonprofit status for NVRA mailings that meet the USPS standard mail requirements.

Good Ideas

- Get the most out of your website! When voters want information they're likely to visit your website. Some of the services offered on county websites are:
    - Online replacement ballots
    - Live video feed of canvassing at the ballot processing center
    - Ballot drop box locator with photos and/or mapping capability
    - District Questionnaire—Jurisdictions fill out online

Good Ideas

- Have a plan! Brainstorm scenarios of what could go wrong. For instance, what will you do if you find redistricting errors in your address file? What happens when voters receive the wrong ballot?

- Be social! Provide voter education at a low cost with Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and blogs. Several counties are using these options to provide voter registration and ballot information.

- Be a good neighbor! Set up a communication protocol for your shared districts. Problems with sharing information continue. A communication protocol will ensure that every county receives correct information about these elections.

- How often do you evaluate your process? Self-evaluation is the best tool for growth and improvement.

Good Ideas

- Keep your written procedures up to date. This will help train new staff, provide backup in case of emergency, and document your processes for observers.

- Go visual! Try writing your procedures as flow charts. Chelan County has had success writing procedures with charts and diagrams.

- Assume you will have a recount. In all elections, follow security procedures and ensure documentation is in order.

- Have a detailed "election calendar" or checklist and review it daily. Include county-specific deadlines and a reminder for sending Address Confidentiality ballots.

Assignment

Do you have a tip or technique to share? Your elections department may be utilizing a best practice that could benefit other counties. Let us know and we'll add it to this reference tool. To receive credit for training hours, please respond to the three essay questions below. Send your responses to ctsupport@sos.wa.gov.

1. If you've applied a practice covered in this presentation, please describe in detail *how* it's been implemented in your county. Explain *why* it has been successful (or why not). How do you know it was successful? What have you learned?

2. Describe a practice *not* covered in this presentation that's been successfully implemented in your county. *Why* was the practice implemented? *How* has it impacted your process?

3. Select a technique in this presentation that's not currently practiced in your county, but one that you would like to try. Explain *how* and *why* you would like to implement it. How will you measure its success?