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Recommendations on Best Practices for County Elections Officials from Georgia Poll Workers

The ACLU of Georgia continually works to protect and expand the right to vote for every Georgian. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented significant challenges to election administration in Georgia, forcing voters to confront unprecedented obstacles in casting their ballots. As the state looks to November, poll workers remain the first line of defense in protecting the right to vote for every citizen. The purpose of this report is to provide administrative recommendations from Georgia poll workers to shore up elections going forward, including the November general election where feasible.

BACKGROUND

Georgia's June 9 primary election was plagued by long lines, extreme delays, equipment malfunctions, and a shortage of well-trained poll workers. The rapid implementation of Georgia's new voting system, along with equipment failure ranging from jammed printers to crashing touch screens, added to challenges faced by poll workers across the state. Further, glaring procedural blind spots resulted in an improper use of provisional ballots, failure to cancel absentee ballots for in-person voters legally, and early closures of polling locations.¹

Staffing challenges were exacerbated by the ongoing global pandemic. Many poll workers dropped out due to the risk of contracting COVID-19, local poll worker recruitment efforts either failed to be clear about how one becomes a poll worker or were hard to find, and many Georgians who had asked to serve as poll workers never received a response. Given these circumstances, the ACLU of Georgia launched its Poll Worker Recruitment Program in early July.

“We know that the June 9 election didn’t go as well as it should have. So we are working with elections officials and civic organizations throughout the state to ensure that elections work the way they should,” said Christopher Bruce, Political Director of the ACLU of Georgia. “We ask civic-minded citizens to answer the call and sign up as poll workers to help their neighbors exercise their sacred right to vote.”

Given that 72 is the average age of poll workers in Georgia, the program began looking to recruit younger Georgians who are at lower risk of COVID-19 complications.² Additionally, the ACLU of Georgia’s Poll Worker Recruitment Program is recruiting lawyers committed to understanding the ins and outs of election

¹ [Extreme voting lines expose where Georgia primary failed](#), by Mark Niesse and Nick Thieme, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, July 28, 2020.

² [Fulton, state chart path forward to fix election issues](#), by Stephen Fowler, Georgia Public Broadcasting, June 22, 2020.

law and administration. To address technology challenges, the program is also recruiting tech-savvy Georgians who can help keep voting machines running.

Georgia officials must seek to remedy the excessive wait times, late closures, and technical malfunctions that plagued the June 9 primary. However, in order to do so, they must first resolve the training, staffing, and equipment difficulties encountered by poll workers.

SUGGESTED RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on feedback from poll workers recruited by the ACLU of Georgia, all of whom have already worked in at least one previous election in the 2020 cycle, we present various solutions to resolve voting obstructions. To ensure that all Georgians can safely and efficiently vote in future elections, the ACLU of Georgia recommends that all Georgia counties consider the following seventeen targeted improvements to election processes, organized within these six overarching recommendations:

1. Simplify the application process and adopt shorter shifts to encourage more people to become poll workers.
2. Organize training materials in an easily digestible format to increase awareness on the nuances of election procedure.
3. Implement dry runs and personnel/equipment contingency plans to preempt common Election Day challenges faced by poll workers.
4. Simplify the absentee ballot cancellation process to reduce wait times.
5. Expand channels for feedback from poll workers to allow for continuous improvement of the elections process.
6. Adopt Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Guidelines to protect the health of poll workers and voters.

1. Simplify the application process and adopt shorter shifts to encourage more people to become poll workers.

As Georgia counties address the shortage of poll workers, recruitment strategies that attract a large and diverse pool of applicants will ensure that an adequate number of qualified candidates are selected to serve as poll workers.³ Unfortunately, the overly complicated application process in many counties may deter qualified applicants from applying. As one poll worker noted:

“In [County X], you actually have to submit an application and then fill out an I-9 form in advance... For you to become a poll worker, you have to be able to get the PDF printed out, fill it in, scan it, and send it back. I could see that being a real drop-off point for people who try to become poll workers.”

Considering that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected many people’s access to public libraries or offices where printers and scanners are available, these logistical hurdles may prove especially challenging. In addition to the cumbersome application process, most counties require poll workers to

³ Election depends on hiring many new poll workers across Georgia, by Mark Niese, Atlanta Journal Constitution, August 26, 2020.

commit to a 12-15 hour workday, resulting in mental and physical exhaustion.⁴ The long hours may also prevent applicants with family or work obligations from becoming poll workers.

As another poll worker noted, “A 14-hour day is a *really* long day. Even the best of us accidentally overlook things when we’re exhausted.” The long shifts and surge in voters expected between 5pm-7pm pose a high risk for human error, potentially leading to voter disenfranchisement.

Over 90% of the applicants who signed up through the ACLU of Georgia are willing to work for free as volunteer poll workers instead of being paid. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, Georgia is a state where poll workers are allowed to opt out of compensation; however, applying as an unpaid poll worker is currently difficult in most counties.⁵ Accommodating volunteers is a convenient means of increasing the number of available poll workers, which may allow for the scheduling of shorter shifts.

To encourage a more significant number of qualified applicants to apply, all Georgia counties should:

1. Streamline the hiring of poll workers by stripping away cumbersome application requirements more applicable to long-term, full-time employees.
2. Adopt an HR system that will accommodate volunteer poll workers in addition to paid poll workers.
3. Adopt shorter shifts to relieve poll workers from exhaustion and encourage more applicants to participate.

2. Organize training materials in an easily digestible format to increase awareness on the nuances of election procedure.

Poll workers need targeted, clear, and concise training to fulfill their responsibilities.⁶ Many of the current county trainings provide a broad scope of instructions that are relevant to all positions at the polls. However, these instructions are often presented in a confusing or disorganized way, leaving poll workers unable to identify the information that applies directly to their given role. As one poll worker noted:

“The student library [of materials] to which I was assigned had overlapping materials that were relevant for all positions, from non-issuing clerk all the way up to poll manager. The library contained almost 60 documents totaling 286 pages of content and 65 videos lasting a total of 90 minutes. On top of that, the order of all of the materials was very confusing and overwhelming.”

⁴ ‘Overwhelming’: Georgia poll worker describes voting chaos, Sudhin Thanawala, ABC News, June 12, 2020.

⁵ Election Poll Workers, National Conference of State Legislatures, June 17, 2020.

⁶ 6 Tips to Employ Effective Poll Workers, U.S. Election Assistance Commission, July 2014.

Many poll workers report feeling unprepared to respond to technical demands, assist voters in filling out their paperwork, execute the provisional ballot process, and clear voters who had previously registered absentee.

To enhance training procedures, all Georgia counties should:

1. Provide poll workers with specialized training reflective of their specific roles and organize training materials by position (e.g. clerk, assistant poll manager, poll manager).
2. Ensure that training does not overemphasize reliance on poll managers. All poll workers must be able to work with minimal supervision on Election Day.
3. Provide hands-on training with all equipment before Election Day – including basic troubleshooting for common equipment issues.
4. For high-priority topics such as handling absentee and provisional ballots, provide specialized training to at least one clerk or manager per facility, allowing them to act as subject matter experts in these areas.

3. Implement dry runs and personnel/equipment contingency plans to preempt common Election Day challenges faced by poll workers.

Resource shortages and malfunctioning equipment presented significant hindrances to poll workers' ability to administer polling locations. Many precincts lacked sufficient resources including sample ballots, provisional ballots, absentee ballot affidavit forms, functioning scanners, location signage, and street signs.⁷ Poll workers also reported extensive challenges using and troubleshooting new voting equipment. After working the polls, one poll worker suggested:

“Poll managers need to be thoroughly trained and capable of handling fast-paced, technologically-dependent environments...If the voting process is to be so reliant on technology, then the people operating the voting precincts need to be experts using that technology.”

Counties must also be prepared for last minute shortages of poll workers on Election Day.⁸ In one Georgia county, only four out of 12 poll workers reported to work at their assigned precinct during the primary election.⁹ One poll worker recruited by the ACLU of Georgia who worked the August 11 runoff election similarly reported, “We were understaffed. We were supposed to have seven [on] call poll workers. We had four.”

These types of resource shortages and technical challenges contribute to delayed openings and long lines on Election Day.

To avoid resource shortages and prevent technical challenges, all Georgia counties should:

⁷ [Voters run into issues at the polls across metro Atlanta](#), WSBTV, June 9, 2020.

⁸ In Palm Beach County, Florida, for example, 800 poll workers did not show up to their scheduled shifts for the March primaries. [Young people are trying to save the US election amid dire poll worker shortage](#), Ray Levy-Uyeda, The Guardian, September 1, 2020.

⁹ [Georgia's Predictably Problematic Primary Becomes a Reality](#), Stephen Fowler, Georgia Public Broadcasting, June 9, 2020.

1. Mandate dry runs of polling procedures at the locations to take place no later than 7:00 pm on the Monday before Election Day. Implement contingencies in case these dry runs expose resource shortages or equipment failures.
2. Increase the number of provisional ballots at each polling location from the quota of 10% of registered voters to 25% of registered voters to prepare for COVID-19 and equipment-related complications, especially at all polling locations that have been split within this election cycle.
3. Schedule a number of poll workers to be “floaters” who will be available to travel to any location in need of additional assistance on Election Day.
4. Schedule trained elections equipment technicians to be readily available at every polling location.

4. Simplify the absentee ballot cancellation process to reduce wait times.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, an unprecedented number of voters are relying on absentee ballots to cast their votes.¹⁰ However, in light of widely-reported concerns over the United States Postal Service, a significant portion of these voters may not receive their ballot until the eve of the election, may not receive their ballot at all, or simply may lack confidence in the Postal Service to return their ballot in a timely manner, and will instead seek to vote in person. When this happens, poll managers must cancel voters’ original absentee ballots before allowing them to vote in person at the election facility. Currently, this requires that poll managers make a phone call to the county’s Department of Registration and Voting each time they need to cancel an absentee ballot. One poll worker noted:

“The absentee issue...became a process because the only person who could make the phone call was the poll manager, so we were constantly having to flag her down. If she was involved with something else, then we had a few people queued up...We also did not have absentee ballot affidavit forms at the beginning of the day. [The poll manager] had to call and they basically said get signatures without the forms, so we had five sheets of paper with signatures on them without text or verbiage.”

The current process for canceling absentee ballots can easily result in long lines, increased wait times, instances of improper voting procedures, and poll worker burn out. Such issues pose a severe threat to the efficiency and efficacy of our elections.

To avoid complications and excessive wait times due to absentee ballot cancellations, Georgia counties should:

1. Designate a specific poll worker at each polling location to manage the cancellation of absentee ballots.
2. Provide laptops dedicated to canceling absentee ballots in real-time at all polling locations to significantly reduce wait times for would-be absentee voters who decide to vote in-person.

¹⁰ [1.1 Million Georgians Have Already Requested Absentee Ballots For November](#), Stephen Fowler, Georgia Public Broadcasting, September 17, 2020.

5. Expand channels for feedback from poll workers to allow for continuous improvement of the elections process.

To continually improve our elections processes, poll workers must be able to deliver feedback to county officials based on their first-hand experiences.¹¹ One poll worker recounted:

“The polls barely opened in time because the poll manager did not know where the keys to the cabinets were. The opening process was largely skipped, the breaking of seals was not properly documented, nothing else was documented on time. It was a very ad hoc process since the poll manager gave very little in way of instruction.”

Other poll workers experienced coworkers being “rude and indifferent” to voters and “discussing politically sensitive topics” aloud at their polling location. These testimonials should be noted by the county for the purposes of improving future poll worker training and retaining competent poll workers. For these reasons, poll workers must be provided with accessible channels for providing feedback.¹²

In order to continue improving our election processes, all Georgia counties should:

1. Establish proper feedback channels, such as automated surveys, to allow poll workers to provide suggestions for improvement and evaluate strong/weak performers for future assignments.

6. Adopt Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Guidelines to protect the health of poll workers and voters.

The CDC recommends that people wear masks in public settings and remain six feet apart from one another to prevent the spread of COVID-19.¹³ Despite this recommendation, some counties lacked adequate supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE) this cycle, and some poll workers did not comply with the CDC guidelines. One poll worker noted:

“They will need a larger space for November. Most likely the gymnasium instead of the band room. We could only set up 8 of the 24 booths because of the limitation on space... For August 11, [the county] sent a [technician] who refused to wear a mask or social distance.”

To keep voting safe for everyone, we must:

1. Provide all poll workers with adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), including masks, face shields, hand sanitizer or access to hand washing.
2. Ensure poll workers are trained on the implementation of proper social distancing guidelines.
3. Provide additional disposable face masks at each polling place for both poll workers and voters.

¹¹ [Feedback is Critical to Improving Performance](#), U.S. Office of Personnel Management, September 2020.

¹² [Election Worker Successful Practices Manual](#), U.S. Election Assistance Commission, 2016.

¹³ [How to Protect Yourself & Others](#), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, updated September 11, 2020.

In summary, the ACLU of Georgia recommends that all Georgia counties should:

1. Streamline the hiring of poll workers by stripping away cumbersome application requirements more applicable to long-term, full-time employees.
2. Adopt an HR system that will accommodate volunteer poll workers in addition to paid poll workers.
3. Adopt shorter shifts to relieve poll workers from exhaustion and encourage more applicants to participate.
4. Provide poll workers with specialized training reflective of their specific roles and organize training materials by position (e.g. clerk, assistant poll manager, poll manager).
5. Ensure that training does not overemphasize reliance on poll managers. All poll workers must be able to work with minimal supervision on Election Day.
6. Provide hands-on training with all equipment prior to Election Day – including basic troubleshooting for common equipment issues.
7. For high-priority topics such as handling absentee and provisional ballots, provide specialized training to at least one clerk or manager per facility, allowing them to act as subject matter experts in these areas.
8. Mandate dry runs of polling procedures at the locations to take place no later than 7:00 pm on the Monday before Election Day. Implement contingencies in case these dry runs expose resource shortages or equipment failures.
9. Increase the number of provisional ballots at each polling location from the quota of 10% of registered voters to 25% of registered voters to prepare for COVID-19 and equipment-related complications, especially at all polling locations that have been split within this election cycle.
10. Schedule a number of poll workers to be “floaters” who will be available to travel to any location in need of additional assistance on Election Day.
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14. Establish proper feedback channels, such as automated surveys, to allow poll workers to provide suggestions for improvement and evaluate strong/weak performers for future assignments.
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16. Ensure poll workers are trained on the implementation of proper social distancing guidelines.
17. Provide additional disposable face masks at each polling place for both poll workers and voters.