LOCAL INITIATIVES TO IMPROVE THE VOTING EXPERIENCE:

Recommendations for Local Elected Officials and Election Officials

FAIR ELECTIONS CENTER

Fair Elections Center is a national, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to removing barriers to registration and voting through advocacy and impact litigation. Since its founding in 2006 as the Fair Elections Legal Network, the Center has provided support for proactive election reforms at the state and local levels and helped organizations navigate the intricacies of election law to make voting more accessible and remove barriers to voting.

The following guide provides initiatives and best practices that can be implemented by local election and other government officials. It highlights innovative approaches to solving some of the biggest problems in election administration, as well as promoting a more voter-friendly environment. This guide provides suggestions to improve administration of voter registration, poll worker recruitment and training, voter education, and other administrative practices. Although the goal is for localities to implement as many of the best practices outlined below as possible, we understand implementation is resource dependent. We hope that this guide may also be used as an advocacy tool to highlight possible improvements to election administration that can occur when local election offices are funded appropriately.

Integrate Voter Registration into Local Government Services

➤ Municipalities, particularly in states not covered by the National Voter Registration Act, should encourage state and local public assistance agencies—such as departments of motor vehicles, health and human services, or employment services—to provide opportunities to register to vote during transactions with the citizens they serve. This makes registration more widely available and allows voters to receive support in completing the registration process from government officials to ensure accurate completion of the required forms. To offer such voter registration services, local government agencies should do the following:

- Ask customers in writing whether they would like to register to vote or update their voter registration address and, as part of that offer, inform them that registering to vote is their choice, will not affect the services the office provides, can be done in private, and their decision will be kept confidential;
- Distribute a voter registration application form in an accessible manner; and
- Assist customers with completing the voter registration application form.

Example: In 2014, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin (an NVRA-exempt state), passed a resolution to develop a voter registration program to register voters at places where they apply for, renew, or update information for social services from the county.

Promote Online Voter Registration

➤ Local officials should ensure that online voter registration is integrated into public touchpoints with local government. Forty-two States, the District of Columbia, and Guam have implemented online voter registration. To ensure that access to this important resource is equitable across the community, local governments should make it available where possible in commonly used public spaces. For example, in communities where reliable broadband access is limited, local officials may mandate the availability of dedicated computers in public offices or libraries to be utilized for online voter registration.

Example: Snohomish County, WA libraries, for instance, began including a direct link to the Washington State Voter Registration page on all public computers in 2018.

Facilitate New Residents' Registration

➤ Local officials can pass city ordinances mandating that landlords provide voter registration forms and information to all new tenants upon move-in. This is particularly helpful in cities with highly transient populations, such as those with large student populations.

Example: Washington, DC passed a city ordinance in 2020 to require landlords to provide voter registration information to new tenants.

➤ Elections offices can partner with private entities like title companies and realtor associations to offer new homeowners voter registration forms to register or update their registration information.

Encourage Registration During Commercial Transactions

➤ Credit unions and banks can offer voter registration information and forms at their physical locations as well as on their websites since many people regularly interact with banks.

Example: In 2014, Utah credit unions participated in a 30-day trial period of offering voter registration forms at branch locations of credit unions across the state. During this month-long period, links were provided at the statewide credit unions' website.

Use Deputy Registrar Programs to Expand Local Registrar Capacity

➤ Deputy Registrars, in conjunction with local officials and community organizations who may assist in the voter registration process, should be utilized to expand local election officials' capacity to register voters. Deputy registrars are typically deputized volunteers who have the authority to register voters on behalf of county and state governments.

Example: Maricopa County, AZ relies on deputy registrar volunteers to attend events across the county to register and educate voters on behalf of local election officials, expanding access to important civic engagement resources to voters whom local officials alone could not have reached.

➤ Election officials should seek to employ student deputy registrar programs to register people to vote. Encouraging students and young people to participate in deputy registrar programs can be helpful, particularly where multi-lingual and technologically savvy volunteers are needed.

➤ Training programs for deputy registrars should be streamlined and easy for people to attend. This can be done, for example, by making trainings available on nights and weekends and providing online materials.

➤ Bilingual and multilingual deputy registrars should be recruited from community centers, cultural organizations, and schools to assist registering voters who have limited English language proficiency. This may be especially helpful in jurisdictions covered under Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) as well as in jurisdictions with significant numbers of Limited English Proficient (LEP) voters who speak a language not covered by the VRA.

➤ Make clear that Deputy registrar programs augment and do not replace other community voter registration efforts. This is important to prevent confusion and make sure that a deputy registrar program does not create barriers to community registration work.

Example: Kansas City, Missouri's website describes its deputy registrar program while explaining that their city training is not required to register voters with the state's postcard application and that certification as a deputy registrar is not required to conduct a voter registration drive.

Facilitate Preregistration and Voter Registration in Schools

➤ Local officials should, where possible, <u>host or coordinate high school voter registration programs.</u> Such programs can be to register students when they turn 18 or, in states that allow preregistration, to register 16- and 17-year-olds.

Example: Broward County, FL hosts an annual <u>High School Voter Registration Drive</u>, through which over 7,000 high school students were registered or pre-registered in 2023 alone. These programs are an important way to engage young people in the democratic process early in their lives, helping to foster a habit of lifelong civic participation.

Integrate Voter Registration into Community Events

➤ Voter registration opportunities should be integrated where possible into community events throughout the calendar year, particularly events attended by a representative cross-section of the community and those that reach historically marginalized or underrepresented communities.

Example: in 2023, the District of Columbia Board of Elections partnered with several community organizations and event promoters such as Events DC, the DC Retired Educators Association, and Latinx Conference on Disabilities to provide voter registration services and election information at community events.

Partner with Community Organizations

➤ To expand capacity, local officials should identify and collaborate with non-partisan community organizations with institutional experience in voter registration activities or those that work with traditionally marginalized or language minority communities to increase the availability of voter registration and election information to underserved communities.

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Expand Poll Worker Recruitment Efforts

➤ Officials should recruit student poll workers from colleges and, in states that allow 16- and 17-year-olds to be poll workers, high schools. Elections offices can do this by establishing relationships with college and high school administrators, staff, and teachers who can provide information about these opportunities to students. Additionally, focused recruitment of bilingual young people may aid in providing better, more equitable service to language minority communities throughout the voting process. For additional information on poll-worker recruitment, please reference the Fair Election Center's Poll Worker Recruitment: Recommendations for a Better Voter Experience report, available <u>here.</u>

Example: Several counties in <u>Virginia, such as Fairfax County,</u> facilitate election day high school student page programs, which give high school students who are at least 16-years-old the opportunity to participate in some of the duties of poll workers.

➤ Local officials should utilize city or county employee poll worker programs, which allow city or county employees to use paid leave to serve as poll workers. These types of programs are effective because city employees are generally already familiar with the elections process, and they can serve as a reserve pool of poll workers in case of staffing shortages. Cities can also specifically recruit employees with language skills to provide help to LEP voters.

Example: Los Angeles County, CA offers a <u>County Employee Election Worker Program</u> which permits temporary "reassignment" of County employees (with approval from their supervisors) for assignment as election workers.

➤ Establish partnerships with local community organizations and businesses to create "Adopt-A-Precinct" programs, which allows these organizations and businesses to recruit their employees or members to serve as poll workers together at a particular precinct. This both addresses the city's need for poll workers and fosters good relationships with businesses and organizations.

Example: Counties across the state of Florida, for example, offer stipends of up to $2,125 per precinct to 501(c)(3) organizations, associations, and charitable institutions that agree to provide volunteers to staff polling locations. (See for example, <u>Orange County Program</u>.) This program began as a voluntary one and was later expanded by state statute.

Example: Tulsa County, OK, the <u>Tulsa Regional Chamber</u> launched an adopt-a-precinct initiative to encourage businesses to allow employees paid leave to serve as poll workers on election day.

➤ Partnerships with local and national organizations should be utilized to supplement existing poll worker recruitment efforts. For example, Fair Elections Center's <u>WorkElections</u> project offers a portal to assist in recruiting poll workers by improving connectivity between jurisdictions and potential applicants and supports <u>Power the Polls</u>.

Provide Comprehensive and Accessible Poll Worker Training

➤ Election officials should provide additional training for poll workers regarding the proper handling of voting machines, role of poll observers or watchers, cyber security, and crisis preparedness. For additional resources and information on election security preparedness, visit the U.S. Election Assistance Commission website here.

➤ Training materials for poll workers should include hypotheticals, diagrams, and photos to better help poll workers understand how to set up polling locations and how to resolve potential problems that may arise at the polls.

➤ Recognizing heightened security concerns for local elections administration officials, poll workers could benefit from training on de-escalation and conflict resolution to enhance the well-being and safety of poll workers as well as the experience of voters.

➤ Training should be provided to all poll workers regarding the availability of language access resources.

➤ Training should be provided to all poll workers regarding accommodations for voters with disabilities, so they are equipped to serve all voters appropriately. For an informational resource on the rights of voters with disabilities to accommodations for voting, please see this memo from the National Disability Rights Network.

➤ Local officials should provide or partner with community organizations to provide training and/or information to poll workers on implicit bias and the importance of recognizing its potential to impact their work in election administration.

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VOTER EDUCATION

Engage in Community Outreach

➤ Local officials should schedule visits to organizations and schools that request specific information on registering and voting.

➤ Volunteer programs through which local elections officials can recruit community members to serve as ambassadors in their communities and help elections officials disseminate voting and registration information should be established.

Create Communication Plans for Various Social Media Outlets

➤ Officials should create communications plans and social media policies for online platforms like Instagram, Threads, TikTok, and X (Twitter) to diversify outreach to voters. Other media platforms municipalities can use include Nextdoor and Facebook.

Provide Language Access Support

➤ Municipalities can reach more voters by exceeding state and federal language access requirements, such as by providing translations on elections websites and translated materials in top languages spoken in the area. For more information on options to improve and expand language access, please consult the Guides to Language Access in Voting that Fair Elections Center jointly issued with NALEO and Asian Americans Advancing Justice-AAJC. Alternatively, local officials should direct voters to trusted third-party organizations that provide translated voting information on their websites.

➤ Local officials should ensure inclusion of language minority communities in outreach, education, and resource allocation decisions. This may be accomplished by convening a language access advisory committee or connecting with language-minority-serving institutions and community organizations.

➤ Census data and survey results can be used to inform the placement of poll workers and in-language resources where they are most necessary. This data should be used to proactively identify language access needs rather than relying on language-minority communities to request these services before providing them.

➤ In-language voter outreach and education materials may be created to better engage with local language-minority voters, even where not required by federal and state languages access requirements.

Example: In New York City, the voter registration form is provided online in sixteen languages, including English.

Example: the City of Philadelphia established a Language Access Advisory Committee organized by the Deputy City Commissioners to "provide[] regular non-partisan advice and feedback to the Office of the City Commissioners on its language access program including the timing, implementation, and evaluation of expanded services and materials."

Provide Resources and Support for Voters with Disabilities

➤ Election materials and voter services should be made accessible for voters with disabilities, including intellectual and developmental disabilities. For example, elections officials should plan to make materials such as Braille and large-print materials, and accessibility services, such as sign language interpreters, available for voters with certain disabilities. Election websites should be screen-reader accessible and contain ASL-interpreted video content. Input should be sought from community members with disabilities or disability rights organizations in developing accessibility materials and plans.

➤ In addition to making accommodations available for voters with disabilities, local officials should plan to make information on the availability of auxiliary aids and services for voters with disabilities widely available to the public.

Example: the California Secretary of State website includes ASL video content on the rights of voters in the state. Similar materials have been produced by county elections officials previously in places such as Denver, CO.

Provide Additional Voter Education Materials

➤ One especially effective way to reach high school students to inform them about the electoral process, aside from directly providing information to them, is through their parents. The city or school can reach out to parents or guardians and provide them with basic registration and voting information to encourage their students to participate in the electoral process.

➤ Local officials can create voter guides or other plain-language education materials to explain the races and issues voters will see on their ballots.

ADMINISTRATIVE PRACTICES

Set Convenient Voting Hours

➤ Where possible, municipalities should consider extending Election Day polling hours to increase convenience for voters. Nine states give municipalities some flexibility on setting Election Day hours, which could include additional evening hours to accommodate work schedules and other common conflicts voters experience

Expand Availability of Early Vote Locations

➤ In states with flexibility on early voting locations, municipalities should make early voting locations available at convenient locations like shopping malls, grocery stores, colleges, libraries, and community centers.

➤ If funds allow, municipalities in states with flexibility on early voting locations should also consider offering mobile early vote sites.

Example: Counties such as Los Angeles County have utilized mobile voting centers to target populations who often face logistical and other barriers to casting a ballot, such as hospital and medical workers, food service and distribution workers, individuals experiencing homelessness, and voters with disabilities.

Ensure Convenient and Secure Mail-in and Drop Box Voting

➤ To ensure mail-in ballot drop boxes are accessible, officials should consider factors such as proximity to transportation, access to parking or drive through options, proximity to college campuses and universities, visibility, and accessibility to voters with disabilities.

➤ Local officials should utilize relevant communication methods to educate voters on the availability of drop box locations, including social media, in-language communication for language minority communities, and through community organizations and other partners.

Coordinate Municipal and Federal Elections

➤ Where possible, local officials could seek to promote greater turnout for municipal elections and ease the administrative burden of holding elections by scheduling municipal elections at the same time as state and federal elections.

Consider Accessibility Concerns in Polling and Drop-box Locations

➤ Elections websites should be designed to be easily navigable and accessible for all voters.

➤ Polling locations should be accessible for voters with disabilities in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. This includes, but is not limited to, vote center and mail-in drop box accessibility. Election officials should consider existing accessibility concerns and barriers when evaluating prospective polling locations for early and election day voting.

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For questions or guidance on where to find
additional resources on policies for local elections
administrators and local elected officials, contact
the Fair Elections Center at
info@fairelectionscenter.org.

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