

## After Action Report Board Overview

The DC Board of Elections (DCBOE) team had to adjust and initiate new ways to meet the needs of DC Voters safely and maintain the overall integrity of the voting process. Each DCBOE team member recognized the criticality of ensuring a successful 2020 election, and risked their and their family's health and safety by reporting to work to ensure all went well. As the election season progressed, we all learned a lot about what worked and didn't work in this new environment. During this pandemic, we have materially changed our processes in almost every way to continue to meet our mission to provide the best opportunity for DC Voters to cast their ballots. Voting is the tip of the spear of American democracy, and the DCBOE must continue to identify and implement new ways to enfranchise every DC Voter.

Among the challenges that DCBOE faced were: recruiting and training election workers, identifying polling locations, safely operating polling sites, maintaining social distancing in polling sites and in the work place, instituting telework successfully, messaging, offering multiple options for voting, working under stressful circumstances, and other high-level unforeseen encounters associated with conducting the elections.

For the June Primary, to address these challenges with less than 2 months before the election, DCBOE launched a campaign that strongly encouraged voters to request mail ballots. The mail ballot campaign was supported by a PR firm that instituted a "Vote Safe" design. Requests were accepted by mail-in applications, email, or online request. BOE full time and temporary staff responded to all requested ballot, hand stuffing and mailing the ballots to each voter with instructions and a prepaid-return ballot envelope. Given the short time frame after the decision to implement the mail ballot request program, BOE was not able to establish either an Intelligent Mail Barcode (IMB) for USPS, a tracker that communicated with the postal system, or an in-house web portal that allowed voters to check the status of their return ballots.

BOE communicated regularly with members of the public, elected officials, party officials, interested organizations, and others by holding "Town Hall" type sessions to address questions and respond to concerns related to the election. These sessions were helpful to both the attendees and to DCBOE.

Challenges related to poll worker recruitment and training were multi-tiered. Many of the veteran workers were in the age population that was at risk to contract the virus and therefore opted out of volunteering. Training was conducted in a remote setting, due to the stay-at-home order that was imposed by the Mayor. This provided for basic training, but did not allow for the "hands-on" training with the voting equipment that is an important part of the process.

Many of the polling locations were not available for use due to the health emergency. BOE decided to operate vote centers instead of traditional precinct-based polling places. Vote centers allowed voters to vote at any location, regardless of residence. All vote centers had to be properly equipped with adequate signage and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for voters and staff. Further, a traditional paper ballot option needed to be provided at each vote center for voters who did not want to vote on the electronic ballot marking device.

The staff charged with processing the mail ballots was relocated to the Board's warehouse location to

better accommodate social distancing and safety concerns. Other staff members were directed to telework. These changes required the acquisition of technology, equipment, and basic office supplies in order for the staff to perform all of their day-to-day responsibilities.

The June Primary resulted in long lines on Election Day. On review we realized that voters did not take advantage of the previous 10 days that were available for Early Voting. It was clear that the information about the full period for Early Voting could have been better communication to the voters. We experienced, ongoing technology failures and voters did not receive their ballots even though they may have been timely requested. This, understandably left many voters frustrated and also contributed to the election day lines at the vote centers, There were also cases where even though, a ballot may have been mailed, it was never received by the voter. This was a recurring nationwide issue with the postal service. At the end of this period, many lessons were learned, all of which were put in place as we moved toward the November General Election.

For the November General Election, it was clear that the focus needed to continue on conducting the election with the threat of the pandemic still looming in full force. There were obvious limitations that needed to be taken into consideration. With this in mind, DCBOE, changed course from the Primary and began to design an all-mail ballot election. This began with the decision to procure the services of an experienced mail house to assist with this monumental task and mail all qualified voters a ballot.

In addition to securing the mail house, we procured 55 mail ballot drop boxes that were placed throughout the District, including at every public library except one, so that voters had an alternative to mailing their ballots or voting in person. The locations for the drop boxes were determined with input from Ward and At-Large Council Members along with members of a working group comprised of voters. BOE developed an initial list that was sent out for input, based upon all of the feedback received. The locations for the mail drop boxes were finalized. Ballots were retrieved from the mail drop boxes twice a day. The drop boxes were so popular with voters that more voters used them than any other means of voting for this election.

We knew that not all voters would choose to vote their mail ballot, that some voters might not timely receive their ballots in the mail, and that we had to provide for same day registration. Therefore, Early Voting and Election Day options would still be required.

Analyzing the Primary Election voting wait times, not only in the District of Columbia, but also nationwide, we determined that the voters could no longer be limited to voting at the traditional multi-purpose rooms, libraries, cafeterias, and centers that were the customary polling locations. While those venues may be needed, larger sized locations with the capacity to accommodate larger crowds were also necessary. Keeping in mind the guidance of the CDC with respect to social distancing and the limitations on gatherings, the size of the locations was of particular concern when determining vote center locations.

The idea of Super Vote Centers became a reality. These venues provided the space needed to accommodate more than double the amount of equipment used in regular polling places, which would allow more voters to be processed in a shorter time span. This idea was being implemented nationwide as well. We identified six locations to serve as Super Vote Centers. The partnership with these venues was incredible. The Washington Football Team also reached out to BOE to offer support and became a part of the partnership with the other local major sports teams backing the Board's "Election Week" message.

For the November General Election, DCBOE operated 32 Early Vote Centers, including 6 Super Vote Centers, and 95 Election Day Vote Centers. Voters could vote at any location through Election Day. All vote centers were provided the necessary PPE, which included face masks, hand sanitizer, plexiglass, gloves, and social distancing signs. We posted signs at each Vote Center reminding voters of the requirement to wear masks to enter. If a voter arrived without a mask, site coordinators were instructed to offer one to them. Every vote center was provided with an internal “drop box” for mail ballots. Signs directing voters to “Drop, don’t Stop”, provided a quick alternative for those individuals just needing to drop off their voted ballot, thereby avoiding the line.

A massive communications plan was developed to inform voters of the mail ballots, drop boxes, early voting, super vote centers, election day operations, and more. The communications plan was administered by the PR firm and included radio, TV, print, and digital ads, Public Service Announcements (PSAs), multiple post card mailings, email notifications, and other forms of continuous outreach to members of the public. The information provided in these communications was intended to inform voters of their options for voting, changes to the voting operations, expectations at vote centers during a pandemic, and more. We worked closely with a PR firm to launch a public information “Vote Safe DC” campaign ahead of the November election to communicate directly with voters and make sure DC residents were aware of election processes and procedures as well as how to access any needed information. Further, as indicated herein, many meetings were held, where members of the public were constantly engaged and their concerns were addressed. There was also the use of robocalls and targeted text messages, door hangers, and street signs providing election information to voters.

#### Observations and Recommendations

- Change from precinct-based voting scheme to vote centers that serve all voters regardless of residence: Currently, DC Voters are assigned to specific Election Day polling places based on their residence addresses; on Election Day, they must vote in their assigned polling place for their vote to count. That system is very much a cultural norm in DC. In contrast, Vote Centers allow voters to cast their ballot at any location. That aspect of the system requiring voting at assigned polling places was fundamental when voter records were all paper and virtually all voting occurred on Election Day in person using pre-printed ballots. These records are now housed on electronic poll pads which can carry the identity of all voters on every poll pad. We also have voting equipment – Ballot Marking Devices and Ballot on Demand Printers (BOD) – that provide flexibility to in person voters and thus greater enfranchisement.
- Voting by Mail: Automatically mailing ballots to all registered voters was extremely popular and effective for most voters during the November 2020 election. The DCBOE should maintain some form of a mail ballot program for the majority of DC Voters. .
- Local Drop boxes for mailed ballots were also extremely popular with voters. In fact, mail ballot dropboxes were used to cast seven of every ten mailed ballots..
- Online Ballot tracking systems can be extremely helpful for voters not voting in person to track their Ballot. The ballot tracking systems used during the 2020 elections were generally effective, but not always timely. Explore options for either improving current ballot tracking systems and/or

consider other systems available in the market.

- “Election Week” vs “Election Day” is a concept that can become the cultural norm. Branding the period for voting as “Election Week” will shift the cultural norm to encourage early voting which will allow voters to avoid lines and crowds if a voter is voting in person and provides additional voter enfranchisement. It further creates administrative efficiencies in voter processing and vote counting. Messaging extensively to motivate voters to vote early is essential.
- Poll Worker Recruiting accounted for a major shift in poll worker demographics and created a very large pool of poll workers. Having large numbers of poll workers allows for timely and responsive service to voters. It further encourages voter engagement and openness in the process.
- Use of “Super Vote Centers” should be considered to provide voters interesting in-person options. Super vote centers will allow for speedy processing of large voter turnout. Super Vote Centers at sports venues further involved the sports community in the voting process, which created even more interest in the community and encouraged voters to cast their ballots.

The DCBOE found that frequent town hall style meetings with the community and community leaders was a great way to exchange ideas. It also helped voters understand DCBOE’s legal requirements and helped DCBOE understand the real needs and desires of voters.