

**UNITED STATES CONGRESS
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**The Committee on House Administration, Subcommittee on Elections and the
Committee on Judiciary, Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil
Liberties**

Wednesday, September 24, 2008

Good morning Madame Chair and distinguished Members of the Committees. I am Rokey W. Suleman, II, General Registrar of the Fairfax County Office of Elections in Fairfax, Virginia. I am pleased to be here this morning to discuss election preparation for the 2008 General Election at the local level.

The 2008 General Election is not a single national event. Rather it is the simultaneous occurrence of thousands of smaller, local events. I am here to discuss the preparations of one of those local events.

Fairfax County is the largest election jurisdiction in the Commonwealth of Virginia. We serve 1 in 7 of all of the registered voters in the commonwealth.

Preparations for an election like this do not happen overnight. Fairfax County has been planning for the 2008 General Election for several years. As a matter of fact we are already making plans towards the governor's race in 2009, redistricting in 2011 and the 2012 Presidential election.

Part of the difficulty for preparing for an election such as this is the increase in new voter registrations. Our office has processed nearly 69,000 registration applications since the February Presidential primary. We have registered nearly 41,000 new voters and updated or transferred into our county nearly 28,000 registrations. The office has also transferred over 19,000 voters to other jurisdictions and removed 2500 deceased voters from the rolls. By the time of the October 6th registration deadline our office will have handled nearly 20% of our registration cards in the period between the primary and the general election.

This election will not only see record registration but record turnout for our county. In the 2004 general election Fairfax County saw 467,000 out of 633,000 registered voters participate in the process-a 73% turnout. This November we are expecting nearly 80% of our expected 665,000 registered voters to cast a ballot.

Increases in registration and participation strain the resources of the system. We are expecting long lines at the polls this November. Fairfax County averages 3,000 voters in a precinct. We are telling folks now to expect the lines. They will exist. We are also taking steps to process voters in an expedited fashion.

Virginia passed a ban against acquiring direct-recording electronic (DRE) equipment in 2007. Knowing that our county had an inadequate number of voting machines and were unable to acquire more the decision was made to add optical scan ballots to the polls this November.

Fairfax County purchased optical scan equipment in July. Our county has ordered enough paper ballots to serve 103% of our voter population this November. Voters will be given a paper ballot but may vote on DRE equipment if they so choose. We believe that we will be able to process voters faster with the optical scan equipment thus reducing wait times.

This process does not come without significant planning and expense. Solving the pressure of lines is not as easy as “adding optical scan machines” for jurisdictions. Everything that is crucial to operate an optical scan system needed to be purchased. Our county did not have privacy booths to fill out the ballots so we purchased as many as we could and then purchased clipboards to mark ballots on if voters do not want to wait for a privacy booth. We had to purchase secrecy sleeves to hold the ballot before insertion to the machine, ballot boxes to hold the expected number of ballots, ink pens to mark the ballots, security seals to secure machines, boxes and locate a storage facility large enough to store the used and unused ballots for the required twenty-two months. We have back-up equipment and batteries in case of machine failure. Should a polling place become unavailable due to emergency during the day we have equipment standing by to open a secondary location within an hour. This implementation increased my budget approximately 25% this year.

Another policy that the county has instituted to complement the optical scan system is the division of poll books. Normally precincts would have 1-3 poll books to serve the voters with splits dependent on the precinct’s size. This November our precincts will have 2-5 poll book splits. More splits allow us to divide the incoming groups of voters and process them faster. This coupled with the paper ballot should help ease the pressure of turnout.

Dividing the poll books also requires poll workers to man the tables. In 2004 we utilized 2516 poll workers. This election we are expecting to use almost 3,100-a 20% increase. Recruiting and training these volunteers takes time and money. We are expecting to hold over 70 training classes in 30 days. We have to train our folks on how to use the new equipment, reinforce training on the older equipment and help them manage the turnout. Our poll workers must learn how to be technicians, legal experts and customer service specialists-all from a three-hour class that some people may take 35 days before the election.

Fairfax County is also encouraging the use of absentee voting this election. Although Virginia has one of the most restrictive absentee ballot requirements in the country we expect a record amount of absentee ballots. In 2004 almost 54,000 people voted absentee. As of Saturday we had over 17,000 absentee ballot applications and nearly 250 people voted on the first day of in-person absentee voting Friday. We are utilizing e-mail ballots so that our overseas civilian and military voters receive their ballots faster.

Adding to the complexity of the election is the electorate of Fairfax County. There are numerous languages spoken here among our citizens. Although we do not meet the threshold under the Voting Rights Act requiring the availability of a minority language ballot, we are offering several services to our voters. We have native Spanish and Korean speakers on staff as well as staff trained in American Sign Language. At the polls we offer a telephone translation service with over 100 available languages. Each polling location will have a video demonstration of our new voting equipment and in precincts with a high concentration of Hispanic, Korean or Vietnamese voters the video will be offered in both languages.

All of this comes at an added expense to our office. Staff are now working seven days a week processing registrations and absentee applications. 70 hour work weeks are not uncommon. As we get closer to November the days get longer. Voters call to inquire about polling locations, registration issues, ballot problems and general information. Voters will even call to find out where to pick up a sign for a candidate. Second shifts are added just to process paperwork that accumulates during the day. Our staff now consists of our normal contingent of 25 and 56 temporary/seasonal staff with more arriving next week.

The long hours are necessary because we do not have the luxury of flexible deadlines. No matter the level of work it all must be completed in time for November 4th. Election officials are expected to be 100% accurate in their work and mistakes have the potential to disenfranchise a voter. We take that responsibility very seriously. Not only that but it seems that everyone now has teams of lawyers waiting to pounce if the smallest mistake is made. That only adds to the level of stress.

I do want to take this time to thank and commend my staff. The workload grows and grows yet staffing levels remain stagnant. Laws become more complex and require more service yet local budgets feel revenue constraints. We do not have everything that I would like to run an election but we will be successful. Staff know that time spent at home will suffer. We joke that our families should place our pictures on milk cartons. But they still have smiles on our faces. They truly love to serve the voters and although we are incredibly busy we are excited to see all of the participation.

All of this effort occurs so that the voter has as little difficulty participating as possible. It is difficult to ask the entire nation to do the same thing on the same day. It takes months of planning that one day so the voter has the ability to arrive at their polling location and participate in our most basic and most important part of our democracy.

Thank you for the invitation to speak today.

