

MARICOPA COUNTY ELECTIONS DEPARTMENT

VOTER HOTLINE

Linda S. Weedon, Deputy Director of Elections

The voter is the most important part of the election process. Having a direct connection to an operator and not a recording at our Call Center has made a huge difference to our voting public.

We are a county of 1.5 million voters. The fastest growing county in the nation. As a result, newly arrived voters come to Maricopa County from every state in the country. With them comes their expectation of how the laws and rules work for elections based on their experience back in their home states.

At first, we tried to answer the calls ourselves. That was an unmitigated disaster. We were so busy answering the phones we could not concentrate on the business at hand of conducting the election.

In 1996 the Star Call Center was created by a decision of the Recorder, Treasurer, Assessor, and Board of Supervisors to combine resources. One Call Center to answer basic questions and route the caller to the appropriate agency personnel on complex matters.

The Star Call Center has now answered more than 12,000,000 calls in their 12 years of operation. 2,000,000 of those were election calls. They have 33 permanent staff and they take on 70 temporary workers during peak seasons. Our Recorder, Helen Purcell, has testified before you in the past. She also has the total responsibility for the Election process in Maricopa County.

With more than one and a half million voters we had to create a system to give priority to the call placed by the voter. We also created separate "hotlines", one for polling place workers, one for trouble shooters and one for the lawyers.

One group that I manage is a hotline set up for calls from the polling place workers. Those phones are manned from noon the day before the election through the close of the polls on election night.

There are 1,142 polling places in Maricopa County. We keep in touch with each polling place through our Trouble Shooter Program. If a call comes from a voter or a political party with an issue, the Trouble Shooter is dispatched to that location.

The final “hotline” is for the lawyers . They have staff assigned to enable them respond to any field situation that might arise.

By having the three hotlines separate from the general Call Center number, we can rapidly respond to voter calls.

The Call Center has live operators not just an automated system. A brief recording at the beginning usually answers most questions. If not, the caller can request a live operator. The average wait time is 3 minutes. As a management tool the Elections Director and Recorder have a banner visible on their computers indicating how many calls are in queue, how many operators are available and the time of the longest call holding.

More than 26,000 people called on General Election Day in 2006. The evening prior to the election the Call Center remains open until midnight to answer questions. The Call Center begins taking calls before the polls open and remains open on election day until the polls have closed.

The recorded message at the first greeting gives the times the polling places are open and reminds everyone that if you are in line by 7:00 p.m. on election day, you will be allowed to vote. Spanish Language is always an option. Information is given on how to access our website where the voter can view their sample ballot, find their polling location and get directions and a map.

Because the system is dynamic, we can ask the Call Center manager to change the message as necessary to fit evolving situations. In the past we have had emergencies crop up and we are able to deal with them rapidly.

Voters can request an early ballot by phone through the Call Center. The Call Center also mails voter registration forms and provides instruction on how voters can register online. Voters can request Braille ballots or large print and can inquire about military and overseas voting. After any election, voters can call in and find out if their provisional ballot counted.

Most questions are easily answered by the Call Center operators. We listen to our voters and take their suggestions and complaints seriously.

Arizona's Presidential Preference Election was held on February 5th. We experienced our highest turnout since 1996--54%. The Arizona Presidential Preference Election was a "closed" election open only to voters registered in the Democratic or Republican parties. In the days leading up to the election 50% of the calls to the Call Center were from voters registered independent or without a party affiliation. The Call Center averaged 3,000 calls a day prior to the election. On election day the Call Center received more than 16,000 calls.

It is important to note that all issues brought forward by the Call Center go in to our award winning reporting data base. After the election we continue to review the issues that were presented and determine how we can better handle similar situations in the future.

We can always improve the system. The voters are our greatest resource for new and important ideas.