Quick Start

MANAGEMENT GUIDE

MEDIA AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

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MEDIA AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

The Quick Start Management Guide for Media and Public Relations is part of a series of brochures designed to highlight and summarize the information contained in the chapters of the U.S. Election Assistance Commission's (EAC) Election Management Guidelines (EMG). The goal of the EMG is to provide a collection of election management guidelines, consolidated into one document, to assist State and local election officials effectively manage and administer elections. These guidelines are solely designed to serve as a source of information for election officials and not as requirements by which they must abide. The EAC expects the EMG to be completed in 2008. However, due to the urgent need for election management resources, EMG chapters and Quick Starts are released as they are completed.

The content of the EMG and the Quick Start Management Guides has been developed in collaboration with State and local election officials and other election professionals who have first-hand experience managing elections. The EAC is grateful for their participation and ensuring the guidelines are practical and applicable for jurisdictions regardless of their size and resources. The EMG and the Quick Starts are available online at www.eac.gov.

Introduction

- Public relations involve managing and distributing accurate and timely information to the public. This function is especially important to election officials to make sure voters have the information they need to successfully participate in elections. Activities include educating and informing all customers, including candidates, elected officials, media, voters, staff and the general public.

- To effectively inform the public, it is necessary for election officials and the media to work together to disseminate accurate information about the voting process. Therefore, working with journalists to get information to the public continues to be a necessary job function in election offices nationwide.

- Election officials must strive to develop cost-effective initiatives to ensure that the public understands the administration of elections, and most importantly, is educated about how to participate in the election process.

EDUCATING AND INFORMING CANDIDATES AND ELECTED OFFICIALS

- Recognize that first-time candidates for office will need your help to understand all of the filing requirements, deadlines, regulations, and forms. Candidates running for re-election often need to be reminded of existing policies and procedures and state election laws and regulations, including new federal and state requirements. Distribute candidate packets to everyone who files for office in every election, and post this information on the Web site. Also make this information available to the media. Include a variety of information in these packets, such as:

  - An election calendar
  - Campaign finance forms, instructions, and deadlines
  - List of polling places
  - District maps, including precinct information
  - Information on how to access voter data from your office, including the cost and media format
  - Information regarding how the votes are counted, how provisional ballots are processed, and voter identification requirements, if applicable
  - Early voting by mail and in person options, including necessary forms and deadlines

- Overview of state laws regarding electioneering, campaign signs, etc.
- Flyer advertising Web page features, including the ability to locate polling place information and view election results on Election night

- Invite candidates, elected officials, and the media to tour the election office. Consider hosting an open house event prior to every major election cycle. Invite all candidates for office, county department heads, area media representatives, and political party officers. Take this opportunity to demonstrate how your voting system works. Conduct a question and answer period at the end of your demonstration. TIP: *This is also an excellent opportunity to reinforce new state and federal election requirements and deadlines.*

- Make it a regular practice to mail/e-mail invitations to all candidates and to the media to attend the logic and accuracy testing of voting systems. TIP: *Also mail an invitation to all political party officials and voter advocacy groups.*

- Provide an area to view the processing and tabulation of ballots on Election Day. Utilize this area as another opportunity to describe the procedures and policies for managing secrecy of the ballot and security of the votes. Encourage candidates and the media to visit your office on Election Day. TIP: *Make educational brochures available to everyone that utilizes the viewing area.*

- Take advantage of opportunities to provide testimony to your State legislators regarding election laws, policies and procedures. Utilize these hearings to distribute handouts that inform policy makers about the administration of elections. Examples include: Provide details about how the votes are counted; explain the internal/external security policies and procedures; inform them about voter education/outreach programs, etc.

PUBLIC RELATIONS AND ITS IMPACT ON VOTERS AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC

- Recognize that your efforts will impact a voter's ability to understand and participate in the election process. Utilize mailings to inform voters about how to mark their ballot, and post this information at polling locations. *Example: Partner with the postal authorities to utilize available white space on outgoing and return mail ballot envelopes to notify voters of important deadlines and election laws.*

- Provide easy to read directions on how to use the voting equipment and how to mark a ballot. Post this information in large print within each polling place as voters are waiting in line and at each voting station. TIP: *Provide visual examples instead of written descriptions – remember that "a picture is worth a thousand words".*

- Use every opportunity to deliver voting information to the public. Examples include:

  - Conduct voter registration drives by partnering with other organizations, i.e. AARP, Welcome Wagon, PTA's, nursing homes, high schools and colleges, etc.
  - Establish a speakers' bureau by offering your services as a presenter to area community organizations, i.e. Chambers of Commerce, Rotary Clubs, Kiwanis, etc.

- Partner with schools to conduct mock elections. Use this partnership as an opportunity to reach out to students to encourage them to register and vote when they turn 18. **TIP:** *Encourage students to serve as their own poll workers for their school election. Take this opportunity to recruit these same students to serve as regular poll workers on Election Day.*

- Serve as a resource for State and local political party organizations and voter advocacy groups.

- Develop a Web site for your election office. If you lack resources to accomplish this, consider partnering with other local elections offices within your state or with your state election office to build a statewide Web site. Recognize that the Web site will be open for business 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, so you must have the technical capacity to host many visitors. Utilize this media to educate and inform everyone, including voters, candidates, elected officials, media, poll workers, students, etc. **TIP:** *Be sure to frequently update the information posted on the opening page of your Web site. Remember that it is the "window" to your office, and frequent updates offering new information will bring more customers and will also keep existing customers returning to your site.*

Examples of information to post include:

- POLLING PLACE LOCATOR – allows the voter to enter their address and find the correct polling place. TIP: *Consider adding an interactive map, allowing voters to access driving directions to the location. Also consider adding information about the location of the accessible entrance for each polling place.*

- SAMPLE BALLOT – the voter enters their name and address and retrieves a listing of candidates and issues for each election.

- VOTER STATUS LOOKUP – enables the voter to utilize the Web page to determine if they are registered to vote, and further to determine if they need to update their address or party affiliation. TIP: *Provide a link to an on-line voter registration application for their use. Be sure to include voter registration deadline information.*

- Provide information for military and overseas voters, including how to apply for ballots and deadlines. Encourage the media to publicize this information, especially on their Web sites, which are easier for for citizens living overseas to access.

- Provide an on-line voter registration form and early voting application. If early voting in-person is available in your jurisdiction, provide details about locations and hours of operation.

- Post information on how to file for office for every elected position under your administration. Include details about filing deadlines, forms, fees, and campaign finance information. TIP: *Provide a 5-year election calendar for use by individuals considering running for office in future years.*

- Post historical statistical data relating to every election conducted by your office. Include information on number of registered voters (by party); number of early voters; number of voters on Election Day; history of voter turnout percentages; number of voting machines and poll workers dispatched; number of polling places, etc. TIP: *Notify the media that this information is available on your Web site.*

- Utilize the Web site to educate and inform voters about how to use your voting system and how to mark their paper ballot.

- Provide an on-line elected official directory, including address, phone, and e-mail contact information.

- Post internal job opportunities, including the need for Election Day poll workers. Be sure to include details about job responsibilities and salary.

- Ensure that no private or personal information can be retrieved from the Web site.

BUILDING A PARTNERSHIP WITH THE MEDIA

- Prior to every major election cycle, develop and distribute a media handbook. Contents may include:

  - Statistical election data for similar past elections
  - Polling place locations, including any changes for this election period
  - Special information/needs, i.e. poll worker recruitment efforts, new voter identification rules, etc.
  - Details on "how you count the votes" – include information on logic and accuracy testing dates and locations; and how the votes are returned and tabulated on Election night. TIP: *Be sure to inform the media if the election results will be posted to your Web site on Election night. If so, notify them of the frequency of updates to the web.*
  - Early voting locations and hours
  - Voter registration deadlines
  - Election Day polling place hours of operation
  - After-hours contact information for election officials

- Assign a staff person to be the central contact for all media relations. To avoid the distribution of incorrect or outdated information, inform all other staff that media calls should be always be forward to the designated spokesperson.

- Issue periodic press releases to inform the public about important election information. TIP: *Provide human interest stories to the media for their use. Examples include long-serving poll workers or first time student poll workers.*

- Develop your own operational plan for managing the media in the event of a close election or an unforeseen event. This plan should include details about managing crowd control, parking/traffic issues, security procedures, and preparing for a press conference.

BUILDING AN INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION NETWORK WITHIN YOUR OFFICE

- Conduct weekly staff meetings to ensure that everyone is informed on priority deadlines.

- Develop and distribute detailed timelines to all staff. Each task should include the staff person assigned to complete it and the deadline for completion. The timeline enables all of the staff to operate as a team, committed to meeting every approaching election deadline.

- Two weeks prior to Election Day, create and distribute a document detailing staff responsibilities. Include daytime and after hours contact information for everyone. TIP: *Staff should keep this document on their person in the weeks leading up to Election Day to ensure they can communicate effectively.*

- Review the office's contingency plan, and designate a point person to collect and disseminate information to the media and the public in the event of an emergency.

- Utilize your automated phone system to provide announcements to the calling public. TIP: *Consider offering text-messaging services to all registered voters to inform them of election dates and deadlines, and polling place updates.*

- Develop informative brochures regarding "How to File for Office", "Voting Options", "How to Become a Poll Worker", etc. Provide copies of these brochures to area city halls, libraries, county offices, etc.

- Routinely prepare and distribute monthly and annual reports. These reports provide an excellent opportunity to educate and inform within your county organization. Tip: *Send these reports to elected officials and area media representatives.*

- Prepare newsletters to provide specific information on upcoming election dates, deadlines, etc. These newsletters provide another search tool for potential polling places and for the recruitment of poll workers. Distribute them to area home associations, chambers of commerce, city halls, churches, community organizations, school, etc. Tip: *Ask these organizations to post election information on their Web site.*

- Three days before the election, send out a press release about Election Day details, including polling hours and information about how to find polling locations and sample ballots. Include information about where to get election results and how to contact your office after hours. Tip: *Encourage voters and the media to visit your Web site for the latest information.*

- Reach out to county and city staff to provide assistance and support to the election process. Examples include:

  - Utilize county building inspection staff to assist with ADA inspections of polling places.
  - Public Works and Facilities staff can provide help with the distribution of supplies and voting equipment.
  - Information Technology staff are needed to support early voting and Election Day polling places.
  - Utilize county facilities for in-person early voting at no cost.
  - Partner with your county GIS mapping department to supply polling place/precinct locator maps for Election Day.

The EAC is an independent bipartisan commission created by the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA). It is charged with administering payments to states and developing guidance to meet HAVA requirements, implementing election administration improvements, adopting voluntary voting system guidelines, accrediting voting system test laboratories and certifying voting equipment and serving as a national clearinghouse and resource of information regarding election administration.