



Effective Strategies for Pollworker Recruitment, Retention and Training Testimony for the Public Meeting May 25, 2006

Speakers:

- Scott Lansell, Senior Director of Programs & Strategic Operations, IFES
- Jennifer Collins-Foley, President, The Pollworker Institute (PI)
- Kay Maxwell, Chair, League of Women Voters

Thank you all for allowing us to share what we hope you will see as an exciting, useful, and important tool which has been developed under funding from the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC). Before we delve into our approach, we commend those who understand how valuable pollworkers are in the democratic process we hold so dear in the United States. This cadre of committed citizens are too often forgotten as they serve in their role in our elections. We would like to thank them first and foremost for their important role and hope that the outcome of our work can assist election practitioners into the future in meeting – and exceeding – the demands that are placed upon them throughout the year – every year.

I. THE TEAM

In September 2005 IFES (formerly known as the International Foundation for Election Systems) was awarded a 15-month applied research contract by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC.) Key tasks included conducting a series of focus groups with election officials, pollworkers and the general public; compiling current practices and strategies and applicable state laws; developing a practical “how-to” guidebook on strategies for the recruitment, training and retention of pollworkers; and testing the document in pilot programs this Fall. In partnership with The Pollworker Institute (PI) and the League of Women Voters Education Fund, IFES is now delivering a key deliverable of the contract, Version 1.0 of the “Guidebook: Effective Strategies for Pollworker Recruiting, Retention and Training” to the EAC, the EAC Advisory and Standards Boards and the general public. We would like to share with the Commission today a summary of the methodology used to compile the guidebook as well as some key elements that will be tested in the pilot programs and refined in coming months by further analysis and discussions with practitioners.

A. IFES

Testimony by Scott Lansell, Senior Director of Programs and Strategic Operations, IFES, and Jennifer Collins-Foley, President, The Pollworker Institute.

Established in 1987 as a non-governmental, non-partisan, non-profit organization, IFES has provided assistance to promote elections, the rule of law, civil society and good governance in more than 100 countries, including the United States. IFES provides comprehensive assistance in election planning and administration, election law review and analysis and voter and civic education. Headquartered in Washington, D.C., with offices in more than 25 countries, IFES specializes in pre-election technical assessments, pollworker training programs, and election equipment and commodities procurements.

Since 2002, IFES has assisted more than a dozen jurisdictions to enhance and strengthen their election planning and administration, ensure HAVA compliance and advise on changes in election law. With almost 20 years' experience in election assistance, IFES has carried out dozens of on-site technical assistance programs, technical assessments, poll-worker training programs, equipment and commodity procurements, and voter and civic education programs. IFES experts from nearly every State stand ready to help America's election administrators meet the challenges ahead.

B. The Pollworker Institute (PI)

The Pollworker Institute, a non-profit organization begun in 2005, is devoted to studying and providing strategies for improving the nation's pollworker programs. The Pollworker Institute offers an integrated approach to improving Election Day operations at the polls, including:

- Conducting applied research on effective strategies for pollworker recruitment, training and retention;
- Providing technical assistance to jurisdictions, including revising manuals, creating pollworker evaluation programs, training the trainers, implementing new recruitment programs and training methods; and
- Developing model programs and strategies.

C. The League of Women Voters Education Fund

Testimony by the League Of Women Voters Before the Election Assistance Commission, Presented By Kay J. Maxwell, Chair; May 25, 2006

Thank you for inviting the League of Women Voters to discuss its findings on poll worker recruitment, training and retention.

This project is the first national effort to research effective strategies and current practices for pollworker recruitment, retention and training. In conjunction with IFES and the Pollworker Institute (PI), the League conducted 19 focus groups in six states and the District of Columbia. They included election officials; current poll workers; registered voters not currently serving as poll workers; and employers, civic organizations and groups in a position to impact the participation of potential pollworkers. In-depth interviews were conducted to supplement the focus group findings.

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The goals were to identify successful strategies in the recruitment, training and retention of poll workers, and to underscore “potential pitfalls when replicating and adapting” these strategies.

It is important to note that our central findings are drawn from focus groups. Unlike data gathered from surveys, focus groups produce qualitative data and cannot be generalized to the communities involved or the public at large. The findings represent what focus group participants related to the researchers. We, therefore, caution that it would be premature to apply these findings more broadly without additional work.

Key Findings

Our key findings are grouped into general practices that can be applied to the whole system of pollworker recruitment, retention and training, and specific practices applicable to the individual areas of pollworker recruitment; training; and retention. In my remarks this morning I will highlight one key recommendation in each area. However, our report submitted to the EAC includes a detailed description of all our findings, as well as the methodology employed.

Overview

Let me first share with you some general conclusions from this phase of the research.

1. Of the various focus groups, those including elections officials garnered the richest information. A major discovery from this population was that poll worker recruitment, training and retention are all primarily constrained by shoe-string budgets, limited staff and a system that historically had little need for change.

2. The most important theme is - there is no “magic bullet.” There is no one-size-fits-all solution for every jurisdiction or for reaching out to every population. We did, however, find numerous practices that can be useful.

A. Our first group of findings suggests that the whole system - poll worker recruitment, training and retention processes - would benefit from the application of several practices.

One important step to take is to share information across jurisdictions. It is clear that many jurisdictions are implementing innovative management practices, but officials do not have robust mechanisms for sharing their experiences with election officials across the country. Officials are too busy and resource strapped to learn what others are doing.

B. Our second set of findings applies to the pollworker recruitment processes.

We found that officials need to make it easy, tell them often and know the community's needs. Jurisdictions should use as many different recruitment methods as their offices can support and make it easy for potential pollworkers to participate. A systematic approach is required: a careful assessment plan should be created not only to employ various recruiting methods, but also to track those most successful.

C. The third group of findings suggests that training programs would specifically benefit by trying a number of different and unique practices:

It was clear that the application of required but flexible training opportunities does have an impact. While training is not currently required in every jurisdiction, changes in election administration practices will likely result in more demanding training requirements from more jurisdictions. Providing potential pollworkers with different training options is preferred.

D. And finally, our fourth group of findings suggests that pollworker retention processes would specifically benefit from the following significant recommendation.

We found that timely payment and personal touches are vital. The best way to retain poll workers is to pay them on time. This sentiment was expressed by elections officials and poll workers in all jurisdictions. They also indicated that pollworkers are motivated by the people side of the electoral process and appreciate a personal thank you and other personal interactions with elections officials.

Conclusion

The League of Women Voters applauds the Election Assistance Commission for addressing important election systems issues. All voters should expect and experience a fair, well run polling place operation. This pollworker research will assist in the effort to ensure that this is the case.

II. Approach and Methodology

Inside the elections community there is a tremendous wealth of experience and expertise in how to recruit, train and retain the best possible pollworkers. Over the years, election officials have devised innovative and resourceful methods for meeting the challenge of staffing polls on Election Day. The limitations of time and resources, however, have hampered efforts to share this expertise more widely throughout the elections world. The authors of the Guidebook compiled and analyzed hundreds of field-tested practices and strategies with the objective of making these tools more widely available.

A. Gathering Field-tested Practices. Many practices recommended in the Guidebook have been tested in the field. Likewise the tools, tips and case studies are derived from the practical experience of election professionals. As such, the contents of the Guidebook are grounded in the realities of current election administration – a world of scant time and money, political and partisan controversy and intense public scrutiny.

§ Early on in the project it was decided that the most effective format for the Guidebook would be similar to a recipe book, from which stakeholders can identify and choose ideas and models as needed for adaptation in his or her jurisdiction. Just as cook books offer options varying from “For 2 on a Budget” and “Hosting a Holiday Dinner for 50,” the authors of the Guidebook collected models and samples from large and small jurisdictions; jurisdictions which have already transitioned to a new voting system and those which have yet to; jurisdictions which are experiencing a crisis in recruiting a sufficient number of pollworkers to serve and those striving to recruit the best possible pollworkers to serve voters for their community.

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§ In seeking to tap the expertise of elections officials, the authors of this guidebook relied on at least three important sources. The efforts of the Elections Center’s Professional Practices program, National Association of Counties (NACo) Achievement Awards and the EAC’s Best Practices in Election Administration in compiling “best practices” in the area of pollworker management provided a valuable fund of practices and methods.

§ The authors also relied heavily on a nationwide survey of local election officials conducted by the National Association of Counties (NACo), the Election Center and the International Association of County Recorders, Election Officials and Treasurers (IACREOT). The survey provided a benchmark of current practices in the area of recruitment, training and retention. The survey also provided important leads, guiding the authors to those election officials who are actively raising the standards for pollworker administration with new programs and approaches.

§ In addition to researching current and successful practices nationwide, the authors sought to gain a better, more complete understanding of the constraints on pollworker programs.

§ Focus Groups. The League of Women Voters conducted focus groups across the country with election officials, pollworkers, the general public and stakeholders. The final report provided a nuanced picture of the challenges facing election officials. At the same time, the focus group report provided an important perspective on the motivations for serving and potential strategies for reaching key audiences with effective recruitment messages.

§ Impact of State Laws. The authors were also mindful of the complications imposed by myriad state laws governing who may serve at the polls. The compendium of state requirements compiled and verified jointly by Cleveland State University and IFES, offers a framework for understanding the legal limitations in many states.

§ Outside Perspectives. Finally, the members of the EAC Working Group and other expert stakeholders brought important outside perspectives. In particular, the research, chapters on training and chapters on serving voters with disabilities have benefited enormously from the insights and critiques of Working Group members and other experts.

B. Compiling a Variety of Models. The description of each practice and tool in the Guidebook is based primarily on conversations and interviews with election officials about their programs. Wherever possible, the authors tried to speak with election officials from both large and small jurisdictions. The models presented are “hybrids,” merging common and universal elements from a variety of specific, individual models.

Interviews with practitioners covered practical details such as the amount of staff time required, the cost, the resources needed – vital information for any election official considering implementing a new program or enhancing a current one.

C. Providing a Framework for Evaluating Practices and Tools. The authors have sought to develop criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of any given strategy in

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consultation with election officials. The team had developed an initial set of three criteria for evaluating specific practices: 1) is the practice sustainable? 2) is the practice measurable? 3) is the practice replicable? We hope that the criteria will provide a useful framework for people to evaluate programs. The Team continues to gauge the political will necessary to implement any given the project, whether they had quantified the costs and the benefits, and the level of risk involved. The effort to evaluate the effectiveness of any given practice is limited by a lack of data on results. We learned from the NACo survey of its members, few jurisdictions track the success of recruitment from particular methods; even fewer attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of the training. Nevertheless, we believe providing even limited information about the measurability, sustainability and replicability of these practices will greatly enhance the usefulness of the Guidebook for individual users.

Looking to the future, the success of the Guidebook could be tested by conducting another survey, asking the same questions posed by the NACo survey. Wider use of these practices – in particular the training techniques – would indicate that the guidebook serves as a benchmark on current practices.

III. OUTREACH, FEEDBACK, & CONSULTATIVE VENUES AND TOOLS

A. EAC Working Groups

IFES-PI developed, coordinated, and facilitated two working group meetings held over four (4) days advising the project team. IFES-PI identified a senior cadre of professions to serve on the project Working Groups all of which are considered experts in the fields of elections, voter advocacy, or training and had other experience deemed relevant that would assist in the administration of this project. The IFES-PI Working Group members were selected in consultation with the EAC. Individuals serving on the IFES-PI Working Groups included three local election directors; one state election director; a representative of a national advocacy organization; a well-known representative of the academic/research world; and a recognized expert in adult learning and training.

B. Discussion Roundtables and Review of Literature

Over the past few months, IFES-PI have gathered together stakeholders and advocates in discussion to further advance the knowledge base and external perspective of the team. As of this writing, discussion roundtables have included:

1. Interview with Election Training Experts: Team Consultants interviewed key opinion leaders and trainers from the election community regarding popular training techniques and the potential of Adult Learning applications in pollworker training. They provided many suggestions for follow up with specific jurisdictions with interesting models and practices.

2. Volunteerism Roundtable: While the team recognizes that pollworkers are a unique type of “volunteer,” a roundtable was conducted with national and regional experts on volunteerism. Experts provided valuable information including the fact that adults are increasingly looking to episodic opportunities to volunteer rather than long-term; that successful messages to volunteers must be specific (who is needed, how

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many are needed, where, when and whether a stipend is included) and that appeals to “assist your community” resonate more strongly than more appeals such as “we need you” (i.e., appeals to serve the election official.)

3. Roundtable on Pollworkers with Disabilities: IFES-PI staff and consultants’ efforts benefited from a roundtable of advocacy experts to discuss several Chapters within the Guidebook and focus on strategies for recruiting pollworkers with disabilities and for strategies for including accessibility issues in to pollworker training.

4. Review of Literature. IFES-PI benefited from the work of an academic professional who compiled and analyzed literature on pollworker issues, particularly in this year of critical HAVA implementation and piloting new voting system in Primary elections. The review revealed that while there is an increasing recognition of the importance of pollworkers to successful elections, there is also significant discussion of the costs of pollworkers. There appears to be a resulting “drum beat” urging stakeholders toward vote-by-mail and Voting Centers without assessing the costs of those to the current in-person, neighborhood-based culture of U.S. elections.

C. NACo Survey of Members

The IFES-PI team worked extensively with the National Association of Counties (NACo) on NACo’s survey of 3,000 counties on issues related to pollworkers. IFES-PI Team members assisted in facilitating The Election Center and IACREOT as survey partners, hoping that their endorsement would encourage greater participation. The survey was e-mailed to NACo Members on March 20. As of this writing, more than 375 jurisdictions have responded. The survey responses are already proving invaluable to the development of the Guidebook substance and discussion of what the challenges and possible solutions might be. A detailed analysis and summary are now under development by NACo.

D. Pilot Programs

The IFES-PI pilot programs will be key to ensuring the manual’s usefulness and will yield valuable information about the strategies and models recommended. Moreover, pilot programs will allow researchers an ideal opportunity to test the impact of specific recruitment and training methods.

Now that the EAC and IFES-PI have selected the pilot locations, we will now carry out this task during the summer of 2006 by:

- Developing and finalizing agreements (memoranda of understanding) with all partners
- Working with partners to develop a timeline for each project
- Working with partners to develop and carry out recruitment plans
- Conducting training workshops for election official training staff
- Monitoring training
- Monitoring Election Day activities
- Conducting post-Election survey of all participants

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In consultation with the EAC, IFES-PI selected jurisdictions which attempted to represent the diversity of the country; diversity in size; in voting systems; in language-assistance requirements. Selected sites include jurisdictions in Hamilton County, OH; City of Milwaukee, WI; and Santa Fe, NM.

IV. Conclusion

Once again we would like to thank the EAC for its progressive approach allowing election practitioners to research and share successful practices through this contract. The IFES-led Team also wishes to acknowledge the significant number of election professionals, adult learning specialists, and policy advocates who have offered their time, feedback, and guidance the past few months. We cannot thank them enough for their candid and very positive input thus far received from these core stakeholders. This cadre of respected individuals have both formally and informally shared with us how invaluable this tool will be and how important it is to ensure a wide dissemination. All have underscored the importance of affording this Guidebook the ability to become a “living tool” for election workers across the county allowing users to build upon it into the future. As has been shared by the EAC, the Team had the honor to present the draft Guidebook, our approach, and research with the EAC Standards and Advisory Boards earlier this week and will continue to solicit ideas and approaches on its wide dissemination once finalized. We very much look forward to sharing these recommendations with the EAC to keep this a living tool and ensure that it is in the hands of new and veteran election officials. It is our hope that practitioners will not have to reinvent the wheel each election and allow the Guidebook to assist those who seek effective and proven strategies for improving, adapting and evaluating their pollworker programs.