

Testimony of
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Before the
U.S. Election Assistance Commission

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Loyola University, Water Tower Campus
Kasbeer Hall, 15th Floor
25 East Pearson
Chicago, Illinois

Topic: Punch Card Voting Systems

Chairman Soaries, Vice Chairwoman Hillman, Commissioner DeGregorio and Commissioner Martinez, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I am Sharon Turner Buie, Democratic Director of Elections for the Kansas City Board of Election Commissioners¹.

Our Board has used the Fidler and Chambers punch card system for the 222,000 registered voters in the city of Kansas City since 1976, when we converted from Shoup lever machines, a system we installed in 1952.

After twenty-eight years, we still consider the punch card system a very reliable, dependable, relatively problem-free method of conducting elections. The system is not exact, but it is accurate and we receive very few complaints about its operation.

Comments we hear from voters have more to do with personalities and abilities of election judges, voter inabilities to vote on candidates who do not reside in their districts and the legal space campaign workers may occupy, rather than questions about the voting equipment.

But that is not to say the equipment is without problems. A major concern is the vast amount of paper required to support the system: (1) absentee materials (list of voters requesting absentee ballots, returned absentee envelopes, absentee lists delivered to polls, rejected ballots, ballot stubs, secrecy envelopes, tally worksheets and tally summaries) are necessary regardless of the system used, (2) poll supplies (ballots, secrecy envelopes, precinct registers, accounting and reconciliation forms), (3) tabulation materials (ballot inspection sheets, remade ballots with associated paperwork, original tally sheets returned with voted ballots, computer check-in log, log generated by computer during counting process, reconciliation work sheets) and

¹ The Kansas City Board of Election Commissioners is governed by four commissioners, two from each major political party, who are appointed by the Governor for a four year term. The day to day operation is managed by a Democratic and Republican director.

(4) Miscellaneous materials (copies of Official Certification – cumulative report and canvass, poll log, list of satellite locations, election judges procedures manual). This accumulation of paper represents thousands of pages of data collected with each election, but it is necessary to properly administer the system.

The inability to offer second chance voting is the primary drawback to punch card voting. Voter education can and has reduced problems in this area, but it will always remain a negative factor.

Commissioners, I must say that I no longer consider chad to be a huge problem with the punch card system. Prior to November 2000, every election official in the nation who uses punch cards would place chad near the top of the 'problem' list. I believe the exposure 'chad' received in the national spotlight during our 2000 civics lesson virtually eliminated most chad problems we had in the past.

It is possible, however, for problems with chad to resurface in the tabulation room. Voted ballot cards² are run through our ballot counting equipment³ at the rate of 600 ballots per minute. If a ballot has been partially punched, it is possible that the force of air could dislodge a small piece of chad and change the outcome of a vote.

This is one of the reasons I say the system is not exact, but it is accurate. Overall, the system accurately reflects the intent of voters, however in cases where the margin of difference in votes is extremely narrow, the outcome may always be questionable.

The only other problematic area we experience with the system also occurs in the tabulation room, but it has more to do with ballot cards than the equipment. Every August, we have difficulty running ballots through the counters. The ballots stick together, bend and sometimes tear. The counting machines stop frequently and we must re-check and re-make⁴ ballots often. The source of these anomalies is humidity. August is the hottest month in Missouri and the humidity is unbearable -- the ballot cards provide proof of this. The end result is an extended amount of time required to count the ballots.

But for the instances described above, which are inherent to the system and to the region (in the case of problems with humidity), I believe that all other problems associated with punch card voting are the result of failures in the areas of management, administration and integration of the system with election workers and voters. I believe this would be true regardless of the equipment used.

For that reason, since February 2001, we have followed a strategic plan (Attachment I – General Election 2000 Evaluation) designed to focus on improving existing methods, processes and systems in these areas. My testimony will discuss outcomes and best practices developed as a result of this plan.

² Ballot cards are synonymous with punch cards.

³ We use the PC based Votec Ballot Management and Ballot Counting System to tabulate ballots.

⁴ The process of preparing replacement (duplicate) ballots.

MANAGEMENT

Our focus on improving management methods actually began long before the 2000 elections. The steps we have taken have had a significant impact on our ability to improve processes and routines throughout our office.

We broadened our personnel policies (Attachment II), annually reviewed the policies with staff and more importantly, we required staff to comply with the policies. We developed an *Employee Orientation Manual* (Attachment III) to insure new employees understand Board expectations. We provided telephone etiquette training, customer servicing training and sensitivity training. And, we began to evaluate employees annually.

Concurrently, we began to hold pre election meetings to identify potential problem areas and post election meetings to react to situations and circumstances that became apparent election day. These meetings allowed our staff to better understand and embrace the interdependent nature of our operation.

Over time, we lost multiple years of intellectual capital as a result of the changes, but we created a staff that recognizes the need to follow Board policies, to focus on the Board mission and vision statements, Board goals and objectives (Attachment IV), office practices, voter servicing, candidate needs and most importantly, elections.

These management initiatives continue to allow us to enhance the services we offer to the voting public. Though the implementation was gradual, the effect has been dramatic. We now have a "Hall of Fame" where we proudly display staff commendations⁵. Copies of the most recent ones are attached (Attachment V). Many of our office practices are documented (samples shown in Attachment VI), although we have miles to go on this project. Last and most importantly, implementing these initiatives has created more of a sense of staff ownership in elections and staff is more willing to make suggestions for improvements in many areas of election administration.

ADMINISTRATION

During the course of our pre and post election meetings, not only do we evaluate the current election, over time, we have analyzed election functions that begin the date elections are certified to our office and end on the date final certification is given to the Secretary of State. Through this process, we have identified numerous areas for improvement in election administration and the list continues to expand with each election. Recommendations are included on our Elections Checklist Calendar (Attachment VII) and incorporated in subsequent election activity. A master 3' X 4' checklist is posted near the directors' offices and each supervisor is responsible for noting completion of tasks.

⁵ Prior to 1999, very few staff commendations were received.

Some of the items that have had a significant impact on elections are cited below:

- Based on the number of calls from voters requesting their poll location, the election notification card was redesigned. Our staff felt the original black and white card was easy for voters to disregard, along with other junk mail. The card is now red, white and blue (Attachment VIII).
- A special election notification card is now sent to voters' whose polling site has changed since the last election. It contains a notation in red that states: "Your polling place has changed, please read carefully" (Attachment IX).
- In addition, when a polling site is changed, a 3' by 4' sign is posted at the old site, that gives the location of the new site. The size of the sign enables voters to see the change without leaving their cars.
- In the past, receiving voter registration forms from NVRA locations, libraries and government offices in time to include voter names on the precinct register has been a problem. To insure our records are as current as possible, we contract with a delivery company to pick up the forms and deliver them to our office each Friday for three weeks preceding the election.
- To reduce voter errors when completing absentee applications, each area required for completion is highlighted on the form (Attachment X). We have seen a 90% reduction in errors as a result of this change.
- Our election day telephone bank has been expanded by twenty-eight (28) positions, making a total of sixty-seven (67) lines available for incoming calls (includes regular staff lines). The phone bank is utilized for major elections only.
- We established a new position, 'verification specialist', to assist voters who have changed addresses, or have other problems at the polls. Specialists will be assigned to the twenty (20) polls with the highest turnout rates and equipped with laptops to access read-only voter records.
- With the expanded phone bank capacity and addition of the verification specialist position, the Board will have eighty-seven (87) outlets available for voter inquiries on presidential election day, compared to 39 used for the 2000 election.
- The Board also utilizes roving teams (deputy commissioners) to monitor polling sites for needs judges may have, voter activity and problems at polls. Typically, sixteen (16) teams are used, however, one team for each ward (25) will be used in November.

- Campaign workers⁶ have posed a historic problem for voters. Often they position themselves within the twenty-five foot limit, which violates the statutes. The Board has enlisted the assistance of candidates and party chairs to address this problem. The standard packet of correspondence sent to candidates and party chairs (Attachment XI) now includes the statutes that govern this activity. We ask that they insure that the workers follow the statutory guidelines.
- A major problem affecting our ability to process voters election day is that of voters who have moved and failed to notify us of their new address. These voters appear at their old polling place, where their names are listed on the inactive voter list. Election judges must contact our office to determine their voting eligibility prior to providing them with voting assistance. These contacts consume valuable processing time and frustrate other voters who are waiting in line.

In April of this year, the Board implemented a *Change of Address Program* (Attachment XII), designed to remind voters of the need to update their voting addresses. All grocery and convenience stores, fast food and regular restaurants in our jurisdiction were contacted and asked to display a small stand containing change of address post cards. Twenty-five percent (25%) of the merchants volunteered to participate on the initial contact. Face-to-face follow up contacts are now being made with the remaining retailers. We anticipate a 40% - 50% participation rate.

Any response received from voters as a result of this initiative will have a positive impact at the polls.

INTEGRATION WITH ELECTION WORKERS

Prior to the enactment of HAVA, our office recognized the need for better and more extensive election judges training. We contracted with a management training and consulting firm to analyze our training materials, methods and aids. Together we developed a product that has now been tested many times and is proven to be effective⁷.

In the post HAVA legislation environment, Secretary of State Blunt contracted with the University of Missouri-Columbia to develop statewide Election Judges Training Manuals and Train the Trainer manuals for election officials. We are in the process of incorporating the SOS's materials with our own, for what we think will be an outstanding product.

⁶ Individuals hired by candidates or campaign committees to pass out campaign literature at the polls.

⁷ The number of calls received from election judges is reduced; the nature of calls is more substantive; write in ballots were efficiently handled in the last (April, '04) election; judges refer to the manual when questions arise.

But we did not stop there. We developed a training package for deputy commissioners (Attachment XIII) and have made it a practice to include them in the election judges training sessions as well. Separate instructions (Attachment XIV) are provided for workers who process the ballots when they are returned to our office election night (ballot inspectors). And, our staff is scheduled to attend all training sessions given to election day workers to insure consistent messages resonate throughout our office.

INTEGRATION WITH VOTERS

Our Board recognizes that voter education is the most crucial component of conducting effective elections. We know that the greater the extent of education, the greater the confidence in election administrators and election systems.

As documented in our State Plan, the Secretary of State is in the throes of developing a comprehensive voter education package to be distributed to election officials throughout our state. Our Board has created voter education materials and methods that will complement and enhance the SOS's education package:

- In 2003, semi-annual newsletters (Attachment XV) were prepared and distributed to all elected officials, election judges, deputy registrars, deputy commissioners, former election commissioners and attorneys, colleges and universities, churches, barber and beauty shops, political organizations and media outlets in our jurisdiction, along with government agencies, non-profit groups, community based groups, other organizations and individuals who request to be included on our mailing list. Our list of recipients expands with each publication.
- In response to frequent requests for printed information about various aspects of the voting process, we developed brochures (Attachment XVI) that are available to the public. Current topics discussed are: *Challengers and Watchers*, *Political Party Symbols*, *Provisional Ballots*, *Restoration of Rights* (our most frequently requested pamphlet), *Voters' Bill of Rights*, and *Voting and Accessibility*. The next publications, which are currently being printed, include the topics of: *Absentee Voting*, *Changes in Kansas City Elections since Elections 2000*, *General Elections*, *Polling Place Selections*, *Primary Elections*, *Voter ID Requirements*, *Voting Instructions*, *What to Expect on Your First Visit to the Poll*, *The Electoral College* and *The Kansas City Election Board and HAVA*. Public response to these documents has been overwhelmingly positive.
- Our office also maintains a supply of various promotional items that contain our office address, fax number, telephone number, email address and web site address. Students and groups coordinating events are particularly pleased to get these items (pencils, magnets, bookmarks, rulers, coin purses, Frisbees, key chains).
- Just last week, we began the process of voluntarily translating all our voter education and information material to Spanish. Although Kansas City does not

meet the Federal threshold requiring this action, our Board wisely took proactive measures on this initiative.

- Another of what we consider a best practice is the inclusion of sample ballots with our absentee ballot applications. This allows our disabled voters to be informed about the candidates and issues that will appear on the ballot, prior to receiving their absentee ballot.
- We are very proud of what we hope will become our flagship outreach program. Our Neighbor to Neighbor Program (Attachment XVII) is designed to engage neighborhood associations in the election process. Leaders of the organizations are provided with educational and informational materials to distribute in their neighborhoods. Samples of data included in the packets are election calendars, post card registration forms, change of address forms, death verification forms, absentee applications, absentee guidelines and election judge recruitment forms. They attend a training session where use of each item is discussed, then each group is awarded an "Elections 2004 Information Outlet" certificate and asked to share the information at their neighborhood meetings. When sample ballots become available, they will be given copies for distribution.

We believe we have created an extensive list of best practices that will transcend voting systems. All of the initiatives, coupled with our appearances on radio talk shows, public forums, and meetings with various advocacy groups (disabled community, League of Women Voters, the Local Investment Community (LINC) – a community based organization, the Hispanic and Vietnamese communities, sororities, fraternities, and church groups), are intended to increase public awareness of the election process, increase voter confidence in the system and create better informed voters.

During the 2004 presidential election and in the months preceding August, 2006, when we will deploy electronic equipment, it is our expectation that we will have the framework in place to facilitate a smooth transition to a new voting system.

Commissioners, again I thank you for the opportunity to share this information with you. I hope it will be of value as you approach the monumental challenges facing you and our nation. I'll be glad to answer any questions you have.