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A Submission:
The Wisconsin Election Data Collection System
A Model Protocol for Collecting, Reporting, and Managing Election Data

by

The State of Wisconsin
Government Accountability Board
Elections Administration Division
Madison, Wisconsin

for consideration by the

National Association of Election Officials
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In May 2008, the Elections Division of the Wisconsin Government Accountability Board (G.A.B.) received a \$2 million dollar grant from the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (US-EAC) to improve the management of Wisconsin's collection of election data at the ward (precinct) level. In addition to Wisconsin, the US-EAC's also awarded \$2 million dollar grants to Illinois, Minnesota, Ohio and Pennsylvania to "enhance the capacity of these grant-receiving states to collect accurate and complete election data."

In April 2009, the G.A.B. instituted a new online reporting system for election data in Wisconsin, called the Wisconsin Election Data Collection System (WEDCS). For the state's 2009 Spring Election, local election officials, for the first time, were able to log on to a non-complex system and report statistics from their wards directly to the Elections Division in a significantly improved efficient way.

WEDCS is a strategic and systemic change in the way election and voter participation data are reported in Wisconsin. No doubt about it, collecting and reporting complete and accurate elections data in a more timely manner will result in even greater public and voter confidence in the electoral process. Wisconsin's new system is intended to become the heart of a model for other states, particularly those with extremely localized election administration processes for conducting elections.

Background: Arguably, the State of Wisconsin has the most decentralized election administration system in the nation. It involves 72 county clerks and 1850 municipal clerks (in towns, villages and cities) in carrying out potentially six statewide elections in every two-year cycle. In the past, as each election was closed out, the municipal clerk had to complete an *Election, Voting and Registration Statistics Report*, also known as the GAB-190 Form, and submit it to the State Elections Division within 30 days. This Form was in a paper-only format and required significant data entry on the part of the Elections Division staff in order to produce the statistics for meeting reporting requirements.

Wisconsin's methodology and implementation strategy included forming partnerships with the University of Wisconsin-Extension Services (UW-ES), and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Political Science Department (UW-PSD). UW-ES was contracted to help with the generation of Web-based training materials for WEDCS deployment to local election officials. UW-PSD was asked to conduct an independent evaluation for the project, including surveying perceptions and feedback on what Wisconsin's 1,922 county and municipal clerks thought about WEDCS, and their perceptions and impression of the G.A.B. related election administration business practices.

WEDCS was engineered by the Wisconsin Department of Administration, Division of Enterprise Technology. It was tested and used for the first time with real data after the November 2008 General and Presidential Election, when the Elections Division entered municipal data – collected at the ward level for the first time across Wisconsin – into the new system.

Before the November 2008 election, the GAB-190 Form was revised and the number of questions was expanded in order to make the content clearer and more user-friendly. Elections Division staff also revised the instructions for completing the Form, and disseminated it to local election officials.

To prepare local election officials to use the WEDCS, the Elections Division staff conducted "listening and feedback sessions" with county and municipal clerks to provide a preview of the new tool. While making changes to the system based on the feedback received, staff realized that part of the continuing challenge and barrier to clerks reporting accurate statistics was a lack of uniformity in understanding the GAB-190 Form. Staff added "Help" features to ensure a consistent understanding of each question.

Before local election officials could begin using the new system, staff also had to evaluate the ability of local clerks to use the WEDCS by checking their Internet access status, and making sure they were certified to use the Citrix Metaframe Server, upon which WEDCS runs.

Training materials that were created, were refined as necessary, to help local election officials learn to use the new WEDCS either online or in a classroom. Pretest training classes were held with clerks in February. The first formal training session was held at the Wisconsin County Clerks Conference on March 3, 2009, and 12 more sessions were later conducted around the state by Division staff.

In February, after Wisconsin's Spring Primary Election, municipal clerks filed their last paper GAB-190 Forms with the Elections Division. Some municipal clerks may still employ the paper Form for the purpose of retention of statistics, or for sharing those statistics with their county clerk.

The WEDCS, and accompanying activities which involve the US-EAC Election Data Collection Grant funds, have been developed by a Wisconsin Elections Division team which meets on a biweekly basis and includes the aforementioned partners. In March, that team hosted a meeting of local election officials from Wisconsin, other stakeholders, and a US-EAC contract evaluator, to monitor and review the progress for implementing the WEDCS activities.

Current State of the WEDCS: After Wisconsin's April 7 election, the election-statistics questions were answered online by local election officials, and those statistics were reported at an improved rate. While some clerks in small municipalities continued to complete the paper GAB-190 Form, they sent them to their county clerk, who entered the statistics into the WEDCS. All local election officials are required to report election statistics directly into the new online system, and the State Elections Division staff continues to provide training, technical support and assistance as required.

The WEDCS design employs the best industry-wide practices to make it easy to use, and a simple format to ensure that it may be easily altered as well. Those local election officials who still cannot use the system for lack of high-speed Internet access are being encouraged to get it, in order to directly access WEDCS. A contributing part of the problem is infrastructure; there is no high-speed Internet available in many locations in Wisconsin. Since all 72 county clerks do have this capability, they are providing the WEDCS reporting and related services, as needed.

Direct feedback about WEDCS and preliminary feedback from the independent evaluation conducted by the UW-PSD has been very favorable. The G.A.B. and its Elections Division will soon receive the full results of this evaluation – including the complete analysis of the satisfaction level of clerks with the new system -- conducted by UW-PSD.

Future Developments: The WEDCS is a clear improvement for Wisconsin. It has already proven to be faster, more efficient and less prone to produce errors in reporting statistics. The G.A.B.'s Election Division intends to make further improvements with anticipation of a future creation of a website that employs a database connected to WEDCS. This will directly benefit the general public and the news media, who may access election statistics more quickly and easily.

The implementation of WEDCS will also serve as a precursor project for the institution of reporting on Wisconsin's official election canvass by local election officials through the Statewide Voter Registration System. Thus, WEDCS provides a springboard for even more improvement in reporting of election statistics in a state with a tradition of local control and decentralized election administration.

Attachments: *1) An example of the previous paper reporting form (EB-190) used by the Wisconsin State Elections Board; 2) Photos from a March 2009 WEDCS evaluation meeting which included an EAC evaluator; 3) The first page of the WEDCS training guide for local election officials in Wisconsin; 4) A page from a University of Wisconsin Madison survey of local election officials in Wisconsin; 5) A screen shot of a page from the new WEDCS showing reporting units in Walworth County, Wisconsin.*