2013 Professional Practices Program

Election Diary

A KANSAS ELECTION ADMINISTRATOR’S PREPARATION FOR THE 2012 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION AND BEYOND

Johnson County, Kansas

Submitted by:

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Election solutions aren’t always measured in dollars and cents. For pennies a day, the Johnson County Election Office is reaping huge benefits from our election commissioner’s blog – Election Diary - A KANSAS ELECTION ADMINISTRATOR’S PREPARATION FOR THE 2012 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION AND BEYOND: at www.electiondiary.com.

As the Election Office faced a presidential election on an austerity budget, social media was a low-cost means of communication; and Commissioner Brian D. Newby introduced the blog on January 5, 2012 like this:

Election Diary is a blog written by an election geek for election geeks, as well as anybody else who has an interest in the behind-the-scenes work of election administration. It’s easiest to start by pointing out what this blog isn’t:

1. It’s not political. This isn’t a place to get opinions about candidates, parties, who will win, or who should win any election. This blog is about what goes into preparing for elections in Johnson County, Kansas. The blog does have a point of view at times, but not about candidates, parties, or issues on ballots.

2. It’s not about the presidential election only. Many people think election officials only work a couple days a year—that’s sort of the point of this blog, to explain what we do on the other days. It was designed for people to see how elections are run; it also provides a unique linkage to election workers and members of the media.

The cost is simply in time to write posts. The site has a unique domain name, www.electiondiary.com, reserved and personally paid for by the Election Commissioner for $11.00 a year.

The return is documentation at a level not available before, with a corresponding level of transparency available to citizens and colleagues, both in the county and in the wider community. This transparency has been central to the blog. We have shown problems with mail delivery and a detailed video of our voting machine set-up, among many other things.

Election Diary is hosted on blogspot, Google’s standard blogging platform. This allows the focus to remain on content, rather than technology. The site uses a standard notebook template and can be accessed on mobile devices.

To our knowledge this is the first blog produced by an election administrator that is focused on election administration. As such, it provides a unique perspective on elections, as well as documenting history that will be useful in planning for the future. As the first election administration blog, this is an innovative approach to using readily-available technology.

The project is twofold: (1) voter education and (2) enhancing government transparency. As our staff is small, we hire citizens to help with election preparations. Not an election passes without someone commenting that they had no idea so much work went into an election.

Election documentation is common when it comes to processes and procedures. Election Diary takes a broader view, concentrating on the larger issues that impact elections but often are not recorded. This history provides a reference for our planning for future elections.

We have received positive responses from election workers, media members, county employees, “election geeks” among the general public, fellow election administrators, vendors, and others in the larger election community.
The blog has elevated the visibility of our office; and transparency is enhanced when issues from the public arise, such as school safety in the context of polling places – and we can explain that this has been discussed on our blog, along with pointing to the post. It demonstrates to voters that we are thoughtfully and proactively considering issues important to them. This impacts and improves voter confidence.

Readers of the blog praise the window it opens into election administration.

Prominent on the site are links to Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn, plus email. Readers use them with increasing frequency. *Election Diary* is often referred to in “Election Academy,” the Program for Excellence in the Election Administration blog from the University of Minnesota Hubert H. Humphrey School Of Public Affairs, and other election-focused websites.

*Election Diary* averages nearly 2000 unique visits each month. It has more than 300 regular followers on Twitter, with about 20 new followers being added monthly.

**The Blog and the Blizzard**

We learned first-hand the power of the blog to disseminate emergency information through social media during the Blizzard Election of 2013. Tuesday, February 26, was Primary Election Day in Kansas, with particularly “hot” elections in some Johnson County cities.

Beginning early Thursday morning before the election, a record snowfall blanketed the entire Midwest, paralyzing our metro area. The governors of Kansas and Missouri both declared a state of emergency. After a brief reprieve when road crews and citizens began to dig out, the forecasts for Election Day predicted even more snow.

Between storms, it became apparent that the best opportunity to vote would be during Advance Voting on Monday; and we asked *Election Diary* followers to help get the word out through their social media channels.

Many followers of *Election Diary* are city officials and responded to the appeal. The response was overwhelming. In fact, we had more voters come on Monday than we had the entire week before. The Kansas Secretary of State extended advance voting from noon until 7 p.m., statewide, and again the blog and social media contacts were critical to alerting the public.

Cancelling an election is not an option, but in response to the forecast for Tuesday, our assistant election commissioner began proactively reducing the polling places based on what he knew of the facilities, which ones he thought would close, where he was losing workers, and which could provide the best coverage for voters. With five final polling places, we began our external communications.

Again, beyond traditional media, social media was huge. Most of the cities have their own email distribution to residents, and we linked into that as well. The county’s media relations office aggressively got the word out, too, and put the information on the main county web page.

*Election Diary* and its related social media contacts were key factors in this time-critical period. State, county and city workers, plus local media, worked together to insure the success of the Blizzard Election of 2013.

**Supporting Documents**
- www.electiondiary.com
- Screen shots from the blog – *Election Diary*
iPads at the Polls, an Update

You might remember that we deployed iPads at our polling places as an electronic election worker resource guide.

Among the many things we will be sorting out following last month’s presidential election is the effectiveness of these and the potential for further uses. 

The eventual goal is to consider using the iPad, or some other tablet, as an electronic poll book, saving printing costs and time. The practicality of such a thing is complex at best.

First, we would need at least two and may be three stacked together. Then added to...

Bring Your Own Voting Machine

It’s capital budget time at the county, and that has major implications for the future of voting in Johnson County.

First, the capital budget process has been tamped down in an environment of cuts. If you can’t “put public safety” into the name of your project, there’s likely little traction to be seen.

There’s been a lot of talk in the elections industry about the sustainability of voting systems. In this context, many communities purchased new voting systems with money provided by the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA) and those systems will soon be reaching their limit of replacement, but there’s no available funding to replace those systems.
Election Diary
A Kansas Election Administrator's Preparation for the 2012 Presidential Election and Beyond

Thursday, January 11, 2012
Advance Voting, Election Assistance Commission, Topeka

We've Got to Fix This

So much has happened in the past week that I have many topics I need to cover here. One downside to blogging and actually writing is that the work just piles up. It's been hectic, wall-to-wall, and I've lost track of time. When Google comes out with helpdesk blogging, this old-fashioned method of catch-up will have to go.

Tuesday night, our staff was browsing through uploading results to the point I thought I’d be done before the 8 o’clock news was over. We are several voting machine stations to upload results to our server and only in our cross-checks, we determined that about 150 locations didn’t upload.

Tomorrow, that was about another 35 cards, taking an additional 30 minutes or so. Still, we posted final results on our website at 7 a.m.

Friday, March 3, 2011
Kansas City, Civic Arts Plaza, Kansas City

Snow Diaries

This is the combination of three previous posts, placed in chronological order:

In all ways, the election amidst a snowstorm demonstrated the very reason why I created this blog.

Of course, the experience will be detailed here. The first point, though, is to define what will be detailed.

We didn’t have a snowstorm on election day. But a week-long winter event that dropped a Toyota truck into the depths of the entire town. Then, as the city began to regain footing, a second snowfall followed.

The result in Johnson County — and with many of my peers in the area and the state — was something we’ve never experienced.

As a whole, this week has been...