2013 Professional Practices Program

Making Teamwork “Work” for Democracy

Buncombe County, NC

Submitted by:
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Introduction: Teamwork is essential to the administrative process in elections due to the fact that every component of the process affects all other components. Voter registration affects early voting, which in turn, affects the number of poll workers, the number of supplies, equipment, etc. needed for Election Day.

Job Competence: All election officials are charged with the responsibility to persist in maintaining the integrity of democracy by means of administrative processes that are constantly affected by legislation. Simply stated, the question becomes “what do we need to do to ensure that we achieve transparency and integrity in each and every election?” In Buncombe County, North Carolina, we find that our biggest tool in achieving these goals is teamwork.

Challenges/Accomplishments: In 2008, in an effort to streamline processes that would allow us to ensure transparency and integrity in future elections, we decided to take a proactive approach to teamwork. Several smaller teams were created based on the different components that make up a well-oiled election machine. A permanent staff of only seven, each staff member was assigned to approximately three teams, acting as Chair of at least one team in the area of his or her expertise. The teams were identified and formed as follows:

- **Ballot Team**-This team creates the candidate list, proofreads all of the information to be included on the ballot, decides on the number of ballots/styles to be ordered and places a timely order, verifies receipt of the ballots, and is responsible for the security of the ballots.
- **One-Stop Early Voting Team**-This team makes recommendations to the Election Board in regard to the number of sites and workers needed per election, maintains a good working relationship with all constituents and county departments involved with the process, ensures that all logistics are considered, and is responsible for the hiring and training of the one-stop early voting workers.
- **Supply Team**-This team conducts a full inventory and assessment of supplies before each election cycle, addresses changing supply needs, assures that supplies are ready to distribute to the precincts, organizes a division of labor to execute proper disbursement, and is responsible for ensuring that all supplies are returned in an organized fashion immediately following each election.
- **Public Relations Team**-This team works to maintain the website, and communicates regularly with the county Public Relations department to provide them with current information for the creation of brochures, signage, and whatever else is needed to educate the public.
- **Voting Location Team**-This team continually assesses the precinct registration and the physical logistics of the voting locations, recommends possible precinct splits and moves to the Election Board, ensures accessibility and safety at each voting location, creates the necessary packages for approval from the SBOE and the Legislative Services Office, and initiates the mandated notices to voters when voting location changes are finalized.
- **Training Team**-This team works to prepare the staff in providing training for the Election Day workers, leads the way in identifying needs and scheduling additional trainings and workshops, and communicates training opportunities to the workers.

Results/Recognition:
- The smaller teams allowed us to better focus on goals, timelines, and tasks, promoting efficiency.
- The Election Services team’s accomplishments of 2008 resulted in the presentation of Buncombe County’s Excellence in Public Service Award for Outstanding Team.
Proficiency: Knowing that teamwork is the key to a successful election was only half of the battle. Both individuals and teams need opportunities for growth and development in order for the teams to be productive. There are many resources for different types of retreats and workshops in efficiency and team-building. The core team, made up of permanent staff, identified several areas that they felt needed improvement and chose training to address those specific topics. The core staff also continues to pursue individual training opportunities through the state’s certification program and through the Election Center’s CERA program. The developmental trainings that we attended include the following:

- “Horse Sense” - This workshop was conducted on a ranch and required that we work in teams with horses. It proved to be a very demonstrative way to learn about the strengths and weaknesses of each team member and how we work together as a team.
- “Working Smart in Meetings” - This training provided knowledge of skills that allow us to make the most of our team meetings and staff meetings.
- “Train the Trainer” - This training allowed us to explore whether or not our training was geared towards the correct audience, and provided us with a deeper understanding of our different training styles along with an opportunity for personal growth as a trainer.

Obstacles: The 2012 election season brought unique challenges to our jurisdiction in several ways. First, our plan to implement 18 early voting sites for the General Election required the recruitment of approximately 300 temporary workers. Second, there were statutory mandates surrounding in-person registrations during the one-stop early voting period that challenged our administrative processes, and third, a delayed second primary decreased the timeframe to recruit, hire, and train the temporary employees needed for early voting and for Election Day.

Goals: To address the concerns about the upcoming 2012 election season, a brainstorming retreat was scheduled. The relationships between the staff members had developed to the point where trust had been well established and the team as a whole had become an incubator for welcoming new ideas. The retreat ended with two important goals to implement; the first, to add more technology into the administrative processes for one-stop early voting that would also enhance communication, and second, to create “Supertemps,” or temporary employees, that would be cross-trained in the different areas of the election process to enable them to assist the permanent staff.

Achievements: Our determination to increase the use of technology and to utilize skilled temporary workers benefitted the team in a number of ways:

- Social media and email was utilized to the fullest extent to recruit early voting workers.
- We collaborated with Buncombe County’s Information Technology (IT) department to obtain MIFI connectivity.
- The IT department provided technical support for the early voting sites and for Election Day.
- Email was utilized to communicate urgent daily messages and instructions to the 18 early voting sites.
- An internet forum was utilized on Election Day to communicate supply needs.
- Scanners were placed at the early voting sites so that the in-person registration forms could be scanned in and electronically transferred to the office for an expedited initiation of the confirmation process.
- The Supertemps proved to be proficient in all areas and were invaluable to the permanent staff.
- The Supertemps provided excellent office support while the permanent staff trained Election Officials.

Conclusion: The team did succeed in conducting a successful election in 2012, but sometimes, even when things seem to go smoothly, the perfect storm can still arise. The perfect storm of the 2012 General Election was created from an extremely small margin between the number of votes cast for two local candidates in a battle for a county commission seat. In the end, the integrity of the election that we had worked so hard to protect depended upon the team’s ability to come together, once again, to plan, organize, and execute in a manner that would allow us to continue with the same level of determination in safeguarding every vote cast. In order to persist in maintaining the integrity of democracy, we have learned that we have to depend on each other in order to pursue perfection despite the human element. The benefits of teamwork are endless, and in Buncombe County, North Carolina, teamwork has made democracy better.
The Election Machine

- Voter Registration
- Early Voting
- Election Day Planning
- Super Temps
- Supplies, Laptops & M100s
- Election Workers
- Election Day
Team Training with Horse Sense