



# How Local Elected Leaders Can Recruit Poll Workers to Ensure Voting Access

## INTRODUCTION

As election season approaches, it is of paramount importance that people are able to vote safely without fear of risking their health during a global pandemic. This has meant encouraging people to vote from home using mail-in ballots whenever and wherever possible. But in some cases people will not be able to vote from the safety of their homes, and will have to travel to polling places for any number of reasons from being ineligible for a mail-in ballot, such as in states where there is no unexcused absentee voting, to needing assistance in completing the voting process. Ensuring voters can safely exercise their constitutional right will require maintaining efficient in-person polling places, which means that having well-trained poll workers will be more important than ever.

## WHY DO WE NEED POLL WORKERS?

There will be people who need to vote in person during the 2020 election—an election likely to have record breaking turnout. They may have questions, be a person with a disability, be ineligible to vote-by-mail, be in a state that requires an excuse to vote absentee, or be impacted by a host of other factors forcing them to head to the polls. With a few exceptions, most states do not conduct elections entirely or even predominantly by mail. And with Congress insufficiently supporting the expansion of voting from home infrastructure this year, we will need to have our in-person polling sites open and well staffed.

A well staffed polling place will run much more smoothly and thus be a safer place to vote. By providing an organized polling place, the in-person voting experience will go faster, prevent lines, and drastically decrease potential exposure to COVID-19 by keeping contact and interactions between voters low. Local and state level election administrators have begun planning how to hold in-person elections while presenting the least danger to voter physical health amidst the pandemic. It will be the poll workers who implement these plans and will be on the ground directly assisting voters. In this pandemic, this is especially important since information may change on a day-to-day basis. Poll workers will be the ones who know what the cleaning protocols are, where in the venue voters might find additional cleaning materials, and are responsible for keeping voters appropriately distanced. Having poll workers there who can efficiently administer e policies and answer voter questions will help maintain the safety of the voting process.

## IS THERE A SHORTAGE OF POLL WORKERS?

Year after year there is a drop in the number of poll workers across the nation.<sup>1</sup> There are numerous reasons for this. One is that, as more states embrace absentee voting and other alternatives to day-of in-person voting, election administrators believe they need fewer poll workers. Another is that administrators do not often recruit new poll workers. Instead, most poll workers have already worked the polls in previous elections. And another reason is simply that the majority of poll workers are over 61 years old and eventually stop for myriad reasons. A majority of districts and counties, when polled, repeatedly state that they are having a hard time replacing and retaining poll workers.<sup>2</sup>

This last factor is especially important in the 2020 election season as we deal with COVID-19. The majority of poll workers are well within the age range of people most at risk for severe coronavirus complications. As such, experienced poll workers, whom local elections administrators have often relied on for years to come out and work the polls, may opt to stay home to mitigate their personal risk. This will exacerbate the decline, creating a drastic understaffing situation.

Looking at states like Georgia, Kentucky, and Wisconsin, we can see what a decline in poll workers and polling locations means. Without sufficient poll workers, polling places have closed, leading to long lines at the few sites available and wait times as long as five hours. Those that have remained open are also understaffed and under-resourced, leading to poll workers who themselves are not safe and are incapable of addressing issues that arise at their precincts. These issues can include dealing with machine malfunctions, effectively responding to end-of-day crowding to ensure all people present can vote,<sup>3</sup> and more. Having a dearth of poll workers creates a safety problem that will have major ramifications for voter turnout, the health of your constituents, and the health of our democracy.

## HOW CAN ELECTED LEADERS SUPPORT POLL WORKERS?

Given the shortage of poll workers and the need to diversify the pool of election workers, localities will need to do a massive recruitment drive to ensure in-person voting is safe—which is likely different from what election administrators typically do. This is where you, as a local elected leader, can come in. You have ties to your community and can more easily reach potential poll workers. It is imperative that poll workers are recruited from within your community and fully represent your constituency. The actions you can take to ramp up poll worker recruitment can be separated into two categories:

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<sup>1</sup> EAVS Deep Dive: Poll Workers and Polling Places, U.S. Election Assistance Commission, Nov. 15, 2017, <https://www.eac.gov/documents/2017/11/15/eavs-deep-dive-poll-workers-and-polling-places>. See also Election Administration and Voting Survey Reports from 2012 through 2018, <https://www.eac.gov/research-and-data/studies-and-reports>.

<sup>2</sup> See Matt Vasilogambros, *Few People Want to Be Poll Workers, and That's a Problem*, Stateline, Pew Charitable Trusts, Oct. 22, 2018, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2018/10/22/few-people-want-to-be-poll-workers-and-thats-a-problem>; EAVS Deep Dive: Poll Workers and Polling Places, U.S. Election Assistance Commission.

<sup>3</sup> In Kentucky, poll workers, because of rampant polling location closures and having few poll workers, were forced to have voters hurry into the polling places and get in any line possible to avoid them being unable to vote because of the 6:00 PM cut-off. Election Updates, electiononline Weekly, June 25, 2020, <https://electionline.org/electionline-weekly/2020/06-25/>

### Encouraging Poll Working and Creating a Recruitment Plan

Start by reaching out to your local election administrator to determine their plans to ramp up recruitment for the remaining elections in 2020. Strategize with them to make sure they are doing everything they can to increase recruitment numbers, and also recruit from a wider age pool than normal. Many administrators are accustomed to simply calling previous poll workers and telling them what day to come in if they still want to work the polls. While this should not be discouraged, it will take more than calling the same workers to recruit the necessary numbers for this year. To address the consistent decline in poll workers for years to come, you can consider additional outreach such as:

- Asking previous poll workers if they would be willing to refer or contact people who could also work the polls;
- Working with your local election administrator to create a campaign that will reach numerous new people;
- Using your campaign or legislative office to seek to increase the number of young poll workers, who are at less risk of COVID-19 complications than the elderly, and instituting a plan for this that is largely repeatable for years to come.

Likewise, you should work with your local election administrator to make sure there is a robust training and retraining regimen in place. Often, because most poll workers are experienced, the training program is abbreviated or lacks rigor. However, with hopefully many new workers, a large number of whom will be completely new to poll working, as well as new health and safety policies related to COVID-19 that need to be accounted for, a more detailed training program will be required. It is also imperative that these training programs involve preparing for how to deal with questions that may spring up unexpectedly, such as what to do if a curfew is put in place, or what to do if coronavirus and voting policy is still changing daily.

Once you begin discussing the recruitment plan with your local election administrator, consider how you can encourage recruitment. Consider the following ways to encourage and recruit your constituents to work as poll workers:

- **Hold a virtual town hall.** You can give your constituents information regarding how and when to vote while also announcing that your county is always looking for more poll workers and that it is an easy way to participate in the electoral process even if you cannot vote.
- **Partner with non-governmental groups working to address the poll worker shortage.**<sup>4</sup> These groups may already have useful messaging that you can adopt or social media campaigns you can join.
- **Send a mailer or an email.** You could use this to announce that poll workers are being recruited, and it would be a good way of reaching those who would not necessarily be as politically engaged naturally.
- **Use your website.** Place a call for poll workers in a prominent place on your official municipal/county website or on your campaign website. This is a low cost way of getting people the information about becoming a poll worker.

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<sup>4</sup> Please reach out if you are interested in partnering with efforts like Power the Polls.

- **Partner with a local business.** Local businesses can do things like help you provide a pizza or ice cream party to the school in your district that has the most students sign up as poll workers.<sup>5</sup>

### Creating Incentives to Work at Polls

Depending on the position you have been elected to, you may have several avenues for creating incentives for people to work at the polls. If you are a member of a legislative body, you can **introduce legislation** that will allow for municipal employees to take time off to train and work as poll workers. This will make it much easier for people to decide to be a poll worker because it will no longer require balancing their current job and what they might believe is their civic duty.

**Similarly, you can budget for hazard pay for poll workers.** COVID-19 is a potentially deadly virus, and even when it is not deadly it can have long term, permanent effects, like those already evident on the lungs and respiratory system. If people are going to take the risk to work the polls and help ensure that others are minimizing their risk of exposure, they should be fairly compensated for doing so.

It may also be within your power to **provide personal protective equipment for your poll workers.** You may have direct access to the distribution of that equipment, or you may be in the body best situated to request it from your state. In either case, ensuring that your poll workers will have the equipment they need will help people feel more comfortable signing up to be poll workers.

As a member of a school board, you could consider **empowering your district's students to work as poll workers.** You could do this by offering academic credit for participating in the election as a poll worker.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, you can offer excused time off to students to train and work the polls. This same time off could also be extended to staff and faculty. Even something as simple as heading to district schools and talking about poll working is within your power.

## CONCLUSION

Poll workers will continue to be essential to our elections in 2020. As a local elected leader, you have the ability to support poll workers and recruit more of them. Those poll workers will need to be well trained and likely younger than usual. Ensuring that in-person polling places are properly staffed is a way of protecting your constituents. A well run polling place will be a safer polling place, and it will take all of us to make our elections a safe and open voting experience.

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<sup>5</sup> Vasilogambros *supra* note 2.

<sup>6</sup> Please note that some jurisdictions do not allow people to work the polls unless they are eligible to vote, which would take most secondary students out of the running. However, forty-six states allow youth poll workers, usually with the threshold age set to sixteen. Some also may limit the number of minor poll workers allowed per location, such as in California, Kansas, and Kentucky, but research shows that even one student poll worker drastically increases a precinct's capacity to transmit results. Sean Greene & Keara Castaldo, Student Poll Workers Help Election Administration, PEW Research, Nov. 24, 2015, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2015/11/24/student-poll-workers-help-election-administration>.