Maggie Toulouse Oliver

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Category Selected: Technology and Tools

Application Title: Creating Efficiencies in Voting

Bernalillo County Population: 662,564

Please consider this application for an Alliance Innovation Award

Background:

Bernalillo County Clerk Maggie Toulouse Oliver was appointed in January 2007 to fill a vacant unexpired term and was elected to a four-year term in 2008. Prior to that, she spent 13 years as a political consultant and campaign organizer, working for a variety of issues and candidates.

 Her priorities as Clerk have been to innovate and improve the election process and the means by which customers and voters interact with her office. She has vastly improved the election process by implementing a variety of initiatives such as modernized poll worker training, improved information and accessibility for voters, in part, through the use of the internet and social media and expansion of early voting.

The Clerk’s office is responsible for conducting major elections including the primary and general elections in even-numbered years. The Clerk’s functions are primarily guided by New Mexico statutes, with some flexibility in the processes. There are 353,462 registered voters in Bernalillo County and the state of New Mexico uses a paper ballot system. In the 2008 General Election, 283,495 votes were cast. In the 2010 General Election, 203,860 votes were cast.

New Mexico voters have three voting options; Voting by Absentee Ballot: which allows voters to request a ballot through the mail that can be returned to the Clerk via mail or in-person prior to Election Day; Early Voting: which allows voters to cast their ballot at any Early Voting site within the county prior to Election Day and Election Day Voting: which allows for a voter to cast their vote at their Election Day precinct location.

Since at least the 2000 presidential election, Bernalillo County had received unflattering media attention for its problematic election processes. Issues that gained media attention included slow reporting of election results, misreporting of results by older voting systems, problems with the delivery of voting machines, mailings of duplicate absentee ballots, etc. etc. Anecdotally, there was evidence to suggest that poll workers did not implement election laws uniformly and voters experienced confusion, frustration and a general lack of information regarding the voting process.

After her appointment Clerk Toulouse Oliver launched a variety of initiatives designed to improve the election process, improve voter information and accessibility and ultimately generate cost savings.

**Early Voting Site Expansion**

Based on location and population analysis, Bernalillo County early voting sites were expanded from the statutorily-required 12 to 16 in 2008, which included more on the west side of the county to accommodate population increases, a site at the University of New Mexico and an increased number of sites in the North East heights area based on past heavy voter turn-out. The number of staff at particular sites was increased and regional supervisors were appointed and trained to better assist early voting staff and the voters.

In 2010, one additional site was added in the Northeast Heights and the Clerk maintained most of the previous sites for continuity to prevent voter confusion and potential disenfranchisement. In the past, the early voting site’s operating hours were restricted by state law. The Clerk effectively lobbied for a change in statute to allow all counties to expand their hours and days of operation. As a result, all Bernalillo County Early Voting sites were open 12 hours a day, six days a week, resulting in less confusion for voters and reduced crowding and wait time.

**Ballots on Demand**

Prior to 2010, each Early Voting site had to maintain an adequate number of pre-printed ballots for each precinct combination which resulted in an abundant waste of printing and paper.

In 2010, a Ballot on Demand voter registration lookup and printing system was implemented at all Early Voting sites resulting in a net savings of **$819,283.00.**

**Customer Service and Voting Information**

In 2008, a new phone system was installed to handle up to 182 calls simultaneously and 15,000 calls per hour with a two-minute maximum waiting time. An Absentee Ballot Hotline number was installed and publicized. Letters explaining voting options and procedures were mailed to all registered Democrats and Republicans prior to each primary election, while the Secretary of State sent out similar information only for the general election. A new bernco.gov/elections website was created and contained a “Where Do I Vote” application tied to voter registration sample ballots, early voting site locations, Election Day polling locations, candidate information and an Absentee Ballot tracker.

In 2010, a new quarterly e-newsletter was created containing election related updates and information. The Clerk’s staff also worked with the post office and federal representatives to improve Absentee Ballot tracking once ballots are mailed. However, at present the new tracking technology is still evolving.

**Improved Poll Worker Training**

Prior to the 2008 General Election, a survey of poll officials was conducted and key suggestions were integrated into a new training module including a power-point presentation with corresponding video. This new training package was presented to all poll officials to provide for uniformity in training with the intent of uniformity in the implementation of the election process. In order to create an environment more conducive to learning, class sizes were reduced and four regional locations were selected. Expanded training was provided for Voter ID, provisional ballots; challengers and watchers; campaigning at the polls; lines after 7:00 pm (when polls officially close) and the post-election “closing” process.

**Efficient/Accountable Election Processes**

The Clerk worked with the University of New Mexico’s Center for Democracy and secured Pew Charitable Trust Foundation funding to conduct an audit of the 2006 election processes. The audit findings provided process recommendations for the upcoming statutorily-required 2008 post-election audit including chain-of-custody and hand-tally procedures to ensure efficiency and accuracy.

The Clerk also worked with the Center to produce The Election Administration Report, which was released in 2011 and was partly funded by the Bernalillo County Clerk and involved several participating agencies including the New Mexico Secretary of State and several clerks in New Mexico. The report established a comprehensive document to provide guidance on the election process, how poll workers function across the State of New Mexico and what voters think about casting their ballot.

The Clerk streamlined and made more transparent the absentee counting process at the Voting Machine Warehouse. Observers, challengers and absentee board members were trained in advance and the processes and procedures were made available to any public observer. Observer and challenger information is readily available on the election website.

The Clerk utilized a five day in advance law to begin processing and counting Absentee ballots so that the results could be posted by 7:00 pm on Election Day. The size of the absentee board was doubled in order to count more ballots faster and we worked with the Republican and Democratic Party representatives to establish ground rules prior to the counting and canvassing process so that these systems are not affected by after-the-fact legal wrangling.

**Cost Efficiencies**

2008 Primary Election Cost 2010 Primary Election Cost **Savings**

$3,073,667 $2,195,316 **$964,182**

2008 General Election Cost 2010 General Election Cost **Savings**

$3,445,149 $2,480,967 **$964,182**

Savings generated by:

 Ballot on Demand System

 Less overtime due to better planning and implementation

 Lower cost of early voting site leases

 Clerk’s Office Hiring Freeze for vacant positions

 Improved supply inventory maintenance

**Statewide Leadership Role**

The Clerk’s staff facilitated the “user groups” Voter Registration Election Management System database training in Bernalillo County and provided the training guide and trainers. It created and provided the “Clerk’s Guide” to the new audit law that included information obtained by the Pew Grant project, and provided the basis for the previous audit law Administrative Rules. Clerk Toulouse Oliver pushed for necessary improvements to the Voter Registration and Ballot on Demand systems to be fully functional prior to the 2010 General Election. The Clerk has been successful in her efforts to lobby for changes in the election code that include; state ownership of and responsibility for voting machines and new risk-based audit law to ensure election integrity.

Most recently, she, along with other New Mexico clerks, was successful in having a new law put in place in 2011 that allows for “Voting Convenience Centers” to be used in lieu of traditional precinct locations on Election Day. The Bernalillo County Clerk is currently preparing a presentation for the Bernalillo County Board of Commissioners to obtain their approval to move forward with “Voting Convenience Centers” for the 2012 Primary and General Elections.

Innovative Study Components:

Innovation/Creativity

The implementation of all six of these initiatives resulted in more efficient elections, much better methods of communicating with the taxpayers and voters and timely, effective information. Implementation of the new phone system eliminated long waiting periods for voters calling in and the enhanced features on the website provided more information to voters about voting options and instructions on the use of each method. Expansion of the Early Voting site hours and the strategic placement of the new sites, based on population increases and voter demand, allowed for easy access and convenience. Developing and placing the Ballot on Demand system at all Early Voting sites was innovative and saved hundreds of thousands of dollars. By working with academics from the University of New Mexico over a three-year period, the Clerk was able to utilize valuable voting information obtained during the study to create better ways to conduct an election and make certain that the results were easily audited. By sharing these finding with the Secretary of State and other clerks in New Mexico, those responsible for conducting elections, had a much clearer understanding of the voter’s experience and could create a roadmap for improvement. No consultant was used.

Outcomes Achieved

The primary goal of each of these initiatives was to provide better service to the voters of Bernalillo County and improve the many processes involved in an election. These goals were achieved by providing more effective training to poll workers, expanding the Early Voting sites locations and hours, pushing more information out to the voters and creating more efficient and accountable methods to count the votes.

There were fewer complications with poll worker officials, election results were reported within a much shorter period of time than in previous elections, savings resulted from the Ballot on Demand implementation and voters were more informed and more aware of voting options.

Applicable Results and Real World Practicality

The initiatives were implemented in a real-world environment, during a major primary and general election. Voting methods vary from state-to-state, but many of the outreach and accountability measures could easily be implanted by Clerks across the country.

Innovation Study Presentation

If selected, we would prepare a detailed power-point presentation for each initiative, with printed hand outs that would include why they were necessary, how they were determined and end result. We would also leave time for a question and answer period. This presentation would be extremely helpful and eye-opening to all types of elected officials and those that work with them.