

CARES Act Election Administration Grant: Trends in States' Spending

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In March, President Trump signed into law the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. Included in this legislation was \$400 million in [emergency election administration funds](#) distributed to states. Under EAC guidelines, each state and territory is required to submit two documents: first, a request letter detailing how they plan to budget their funds, and then, within 20 days of each election, they must submit a report on how the state spent the funds. This report examines state usage of the CARES Act election funds by reviewing documentation submitted to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) by state election officials.

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I. Introduction

On March 27, 2020, President Trump signed into law the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. Included in this legislation was \$400 million in [emergency election administration funds](#) distributed to states through the existing Help America Vote Act (HAVA). This emergency HAVA grant is the third such election administration appropriation to states in the last three years. The funds from this grant, as well as the [2018 and 2020 election security appropriations](#) (which have not yet been fully expended by the majority of states), are expected to be used for

increased election expenses related to COVID-19. Funds can also be used for more generic election security and administration needs. Individual states are appropriated funds based on the size of their population.

Every U.S. state and territory has requested the election administration emergency funds appropriated to them under the CARES Act. A few states, such as [New Hampshire](#), expressed reservations about their ability to provide the required 20 percent of their federal appropriation in state matching funds. However, there is no indication that any state or territory will not accept and use the money granted to them under the program.

We examine state usage of the CARES Act election funds by reviewing documentation submitted to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) by state election officials. Under EAC guidelines, each state and territory is required to submit two documents: first, a request letter detailing how they plan to budget their funds, and then, within 20 days of each election, they must submit a report on how the state spent the funds. Our research draws heavily from the 20-day post-primary reports of state expenditures.

The punctuality and thoroughness of this mandatory documentation has varied greatly between states. Several battleground states that had their primaries before mid-July, including Kansas, Montana, and North Carolina, have yet to submit their report, or release any information about how federal funds were used. One state, [North Carolina](#), submitted a request letter that was unfinished, apparently still in draft form. Other states, such as [Texas](#), included no specific plan to allocate funds, simply stating that they will use funds on “activities consistent with the laws” of the grant.

II. Common State Expenditures

States consistently spend CARES Act money on a few essential elements of election administration. The most widespread uses have been attaining personal protective equipment (PPE) and sanitation supplies, paying for the mailing of ballots and absentee ballot request applications, funding staffing costs, and communicating to voters about changes in election procedure.

Of the 24 states that submitted post-primary reports, 22 used federal funds to buy and distribute PPE and sanitation equipment. Common purchases included masks, disinfectant, hand sanitizer, social distancing signs, and face shields. Because of large increases in demand for vote-by-mail, the majority of states report using federal funds on postage for absentee ballot applications and ballots themselves. Six states reported spending on printing these ballot applications

and ballots. Other states likely used other funds for postage and printing ballots, [which are among the largest costs in administering elections](#). Fifteen states used federal funds to launch communication campaigns to inform voters about absentee voting and new election dates. Communication techniques included mass mailings, TV advertisements, social media posts, and press events. Roughly one-third of states report that the CARES grant has been spent on increased staffing costs. Staffing needs manifested in various ways across the states: [Alabama](#) and [South Carolina](#) raised wages for poll workers due to increased responsibilities and anticipated shortages due to risk of COVID-19 exposure, [Delaware](#) paid for temporary staff tasked with data entry related to absentee votes, and [Maryland](#) reported reimbursing election officials for travel expenses related to working from home.

III. Assessing Adequacy of Funds

It is difficult to determine whether states have received adequate federal funding based on EAC reports alone. There are certain cases that indicate the funding may not be sufficient—[Georgia](#) spent 62.6 percent of its total allocated funds on administering its June 9 presidential and state primaries, but the state still has a primary runoff, the general election, and a likely Senate special election in January to administer. [New Mexico](#) spent 96.3 percent of its federal funds for its June 2 presidential and state primaries. The general election will surely be more expensive than the primaries in these states.

No other reporting battleground state has already spent the majority of its allocated funds; however, the 20-day post-primary reports regarding usage of CARES Act grants do not necessarily paint a full picture of the state's expenses to date or its ability to cover the financial needs of administering its 2020 elections. Several states delegate administrative responsibility to their individual counties, creating a subgrant system for federal funds or reimbursing counties for their expenses. States reimbursing counties do not necessarily receive all of their bills and invoices within 20 days of an election, and thus the costs they report are incomplete. Multiple states explicitly mention that the spending figures they list are incomplete. Moreover, states do not disclose what proportion of their overall election expenditures were funded by federal dollars. For example, many states did not mention ballot printing, postage, or staffing costs in their reports, presumably because much of these costs were accounted for by [state budgets, most of which are facing shortfalls](#) this year due to the pandemic. Therefore, the 20-day post-primary reported spending figures may not tell the whole story.

IV. Conclusion

Several states have not yet submitted official documentation of CARES election grant spending. The states that have filed post-primary reports of their spending, however, document several common funding needs to ensure safe elections during the COVID-19 pandemic. These include the purchase of PPE and sanitation equipment for poll workers and voters, postage and printing costs related to absentee ballots, increased staffing, and communication campaigns about new election procedures. Some states have already exhausted the majority of their grant appropriation to fund state primaries, but a general conclusion about additional election funding needs cannot be extrapolated from current state spending figures alone. As states continue to hold primary elections and the general election approaches, more information will become available about states' actual use of CARES Act funding.

State by State Catalog of CARES Act Spending

The catalog below is intended to include those states that will be competitive in the November 3 presidential or US senate elections. As a measure for "competitive," we've included the eighteen states that the Cook Political Report rates as "Lean Democratic," "Lean Republican," or "Toss Up" in either their [presidential](#) or [senate](#) ratings.

ALABAMA

- **Allocation:** \$6,498,674
- **Elections within period of grant availability:** State primary runoff on July 14
- **[Request Letter/Initial plan for spending funds](#)**
 - Plan to start a grant program for individual counties to apply for funds related to administering elections during Covid-19.
 - Plan to pay each poll worker an additional \$25 on election day in July and possibly November.
- **Has the state reported how funds were spent:** [Yes](#)
 - Paid each election worker an additional \$25 to compensate for additional duties such as sanitation.
 - Additional compensation for absentee ballot election managers who worked more due to a longer absentee voting period.
 - Implemented a county subgrant system for distribution of funds related to PPE and sanitation equipment. Documentation for these subgrants can be found [here](#).

ARIZONA

- **Allocation:** \$7,874,848
- **Elections within period of grant availability:** State primary on August 4
- **[Request Letter/Initial plan for spending funds](#)**
 - Plan to pay for printing and postage costs for mail ballots, PPE and sanitation equipment.
 - Expect to launch public education initiatives aimed to inform voters about changes in the elections process.
- **Has the state reported how funds were spent:** No, not at time of publication

COLORADO

- **Allocation:** \$6,691,472
- **Elections within period of grant availability:** State primary on June 30
- **[Request Letter/Initial plan for spending funds](#)**
 - Expect to pay for increased rent for larger polling places to accommodate social distancing.
- **Has the state reported how funds were spent:** [Yes](#)
 - Spent funds on new election equipment bought for larger polling places, staffing needs, sanitation equipment, and a communications campaign.

FLORIDA

- **Allocation:** \$20,253,853
- **Elections within period of grant availability:** State primary on August 18
- **[Request Letter/Initial plan for spending funds](#)**
 - Distribution of funds will be through grants to individual counties.
- **Has the state reported how funds were spent:** No, not at time of publication

GEORGIA

- **Allocation:** \$10,875,912
- **Elections within period of grant availability:** Presidential and State primaries on June 9; State primary runoff on August 11
- **[Request Letter/Initial plan for spending funds](#)**
 - To pay costs associated with the state's mailing of 6.9 million absentee ballot applications to voters for the Presidential preference primary.

- To purchase high speed scanners/tabulators to accommodate the high volume of absentee ballots.
- To purchase PPE and sanitation supplies for poll workers and voters.
- To offer a grant reimbursement program for county election offices.
- To create a grant program for counties to install ballot drop boxes.
- **Has the state reported how funds were spent:** [Yes](#)
 - Expended CARES dollars in three main areas: Voting Processes, Communications, and PPE-type supplies.
 - 1.6 million people applied for absentee ballots (about 23 percent of registered voters) and 1.125 million voted with them (16 percent of registered voters).
 - \$4,847,612.54
 - Educated voters on the new election date and how to vote by mail, via TV advertising and a social media push.
 - \$1,477,444.39
 - Purchased masks and sanitation equipment that were distributed to the state's 159 counties.
 - \$479,393.77
 - Already used 62.6 percent of state funds. The state still has a State primary runoff, the General Election in November, and likely a Senate Special Election in January of 2021.

IOWA

- **Allocation:** \$4,859,545
- **Elections within period of grant availability:** State primary on June 2
- **[Request Letter/Initial plan for spending funds](#)**
 - Communications campaign to encourage voters to make use of no-excuse absentee voting.
 - Purchase of PPE and cleaning supplies for polling places.
- **Has the state reported how funds were spent:** [Yes](#)
 - Subgrants to county auditors to buy PPE and sanitation equipment.
 - \$300 for each base precinct
 - \$534,000.00 total
 - Sent a mailing with an absentee ballot request form and information about changes in voting procedure to every registered voter.
 - \$279,746.46
 - Campaign to recruit poll workers ages 17-35

KANSAS

- **Allocation:** \$4,622,500
- **Elections within period of grant availability:** Presidential primary on May 2; State primary on August 4
- **[Request Letter/Initial plan for spending funds](#)**
 - Plan to buy PPE for local jurisdictions and send mailings informing voters of new voting options
- **Has the state reported how funds were spent:** No, not at time of publication

MAINE

- **Allocation:** \$3,299,827
- **Elections within period of grant availability:** State primary on July 14
- **[Request Letter/Initial plan for spending funds](#)**
 - The state *may* pay for return postage depending on funds available
 - [They did not](#)
- **Has the state reported how funds were spent:** [Yes](#)
 - The state provided PPE kits and sanitation equipment to local municipalities
 - Used federal funds to print and distribute absentee ballot envelopes
 - May use federal funds to reimburse several municipalities that incurred costs to secure new voting places and purchase additional PPE

MICHIGAN

- **Allocation:** \$11,299,561
- **Elections within period of grant availability:** State primary on August 4
- **[Request letter/Initial plan for spending funds:](#)**
 - The state plans to use the funds mostly to hold upcoming elections by mail to the greatest extent possible
 - \$2 million worth of absentee vote tabulators are being purchased with state and local funding (and will apply towards the 20 percent match requirement, which is ~\$2.25 million)
- **Has the state reported how funds were spent:** No, not at time of publication

MINNESOTA

- **Allocation:** \$6,958,233
- **Elections within period of grant availability:** State primary on August 11

- [Request Letter/Initial plan for spending funds:](#)
 - The specific spending plan will require approval of the state legislature, but will like be used for the following anticipated expenses:
 - To fortify polling places with PPE for both the “election judges” and voters
 - To fund new or substitute polling places
 - To fund an increase in the number of Election Judges required, in order to support curbside voting (up from the 30,000 normally required)
 - Temporary election administration staff and cities/counties
 - To promote early voting and voting from home
 - To fund expected heavy usage of mail voting, including postage, increased absentee ballot applications, ballot and envelope printing,
 - Statewide voter education and outreach initiatives
- **Has the state reported how funds were spent:** No, not at time of publication

MONTANA

- **Allocation:** \$3,000,000
- **Elections within period of grant availability:** State primary on June 2
- [Request Letter/Initial plan for spending funds:](#)
 - Seem to be giving all the money out to counties.
- **Has the state reported how funds were spent:** No, not at time of publication

NEW HAMPSHIRE

- **Allocation:** \$3,269,494
- **Elections within period of grant availability:** State primary on September 8
- [Request Letter/Initial plan for spending funds:](#)
 - More hesitation about the state match than seen in other request letters.
 - “We are continuing to explore avenues for meeting the match requirement. Our plan remains uncertain until we hear a definitive description of options regarding the state match requirement from Federal authorities. If we do not receive an acceptable response regarding state match requirements, or if the State does not expend these funds, it will return any federal funds that cannot be matched or spent for the purposes set forth in this Act.”
- **Has the state reported how funds were spent:** No, not at time of publication

NORTH CAROLINA

- **Allocation:** \$10,947,139

- **Elections within period of grant availability:** State primary runoff on June 23
- **Request letter/Initial plan for spending funds**
 - *This letter looks unfinished despite being the official submission -- it includes no explanation of how the funds will be used. The letter includes ellipses indicating portions that were intended to be filled out by election officials but were not.*
- **Has the state reported how funds were spent:** No, not at time of publication

OHIO

- **Allocation:** \$12,861,311
- **Elections within period of grant availability:** Presidential primary on April 28
- **Request letter/Initial plan for spending funds:**
 - The state outlines plans to use the federal funds to supplement state funding for the implementation of H.B. 197, a new bill passed by Ohio General Assembly on March 25. The legislation included the following measures:
 - Extended absentee voting in the March 17 primary until April 28
 - Allowed an elector who had not already cast a ballot in the election, and who was registered to vote by the February 18, 2020 deadline, to cast an absentee ballot
 - Required the board of elections to prepay the return postage on the envelopes for absentee ballots for the remainder of this election
 - Required boards to have a secure receptacle outside the office for the return of ballots
 - Required the Secretary of State to send a postcard to all registered electors in the state for the 2020 Primary Election, advising the voters on how to request an absentee ballot from their board of elections
 - Permits the boards of elections to mail provisional ballots in certain circumstances
 - Limited in-person voting to April 28 and made it available only for individuals with a qualifying disability or who cannot receive mail
 - The funds will also be used to reimburse county boards of elections for costs including: vote by mail printing, postage, and equipment; secure receptacles for the return of ballots; temporary elections staffing; cleaning supplies; and protective masks and equipment.
- **Has the state reported how funds were spent:** Yes
 - H.B. 197 included a state appropriation of \$7 million dollars towards implementing the bill, which the report says will serve as the state match for the CARES funding.

- Of this \$7M, the Ohio Secretary of State's Office budgeted ~\$4.5 million in grants to local county boards of elections to implement these requirements, matching the potential reimbursement costs listed above. So far, \$10,000 was distributed to each of the 88 counties in Ohio as an advance on expenses, for a total of \$880,000; the remaining funds will be distributed as counties report the actual costs they incurred.
- The Secretary of State's office also used ~\$2 million to notify registered voters of the changes to the election and information about requesting absentee ballots; the state is claiming \$1.7 million as a match against the grant.

PENNSYLVANIA

- **Allocation:** \$14,223,603
- **Elections within period of grant availability:** Presidential and state primary on June 2
- **Request letter/Initial plan for spending funds:**
 - Outlines a need for communicating to voters the new primary date and how to vote by mail, supplying sanitation equipment and PPE to precincts, and implementing an accessible electronic ballot marking device tool for disabled voters to vote by mail. Plans to give grants to Pennsylvania's 67 counties.
- **Has the state reported how funds were spent:** [Yes](#)
 - Launched a communications campaign including a postcard sent to each eligible voter in Pennsylvania, funded county election staff, and reimbursed PPE purchases by counties.
 - For the state match, spending money to fund additional staff working election phone lines and mailing 50,000 absentee ballot applications to eligible voters who requested them through their hotline. Expects costs of about \$280,000 for additional IT services in handling a high demand of absentee ballots.

SOUTH CAROLINA

- **Allocation:** \$6,372,386
- **Elections within period of grant availability:** State primary on June 9, state primary runoff on June 23
- **Request letter/Initial Plan for spending funds:**
 - Plan to provide PPE and sanitation equipment
- **Has the state reported how funds were spent:** [Yes](#)
 - Paid for additional absentee ballot envelopes, curbside voting equipment, ballot scanners, and ballot drop boxes

- Provided COVID signs, PPE, sanitation equipment, string and painters tape to maintain social distancing, and additional pens and surge protectors
- \$15 additional pay per worker for both training and election day work due to increased responsibilities

TEXAS

- **Allocation:** \$24,546,840
- **Elections within period of grant availability:** State primary runoff on July 14
- **Request letter/Initial plan for spending funds**
 - States that Texas will use funds for “activities consistent with the laws” of HAVA.
 - Will use the funds to “prevent, prepare for, and respond to coronavirus, domestically or internationally” for the election.
 - Will sub-grant the funds to Texas counties.
- **Has the state reported how funds were spent:** Yes
 - Funds were distributed through grants to individual counties. Counties commonly reported spending in the following areas
 - Printing ballots, tabulation equipment, letter opening equipment, equipment related to curbside voting.
 - Additional poll workers to ensure social distancing and work extended early voting hours,
 - Pre and post cleaning of polling places,
 - Communications campaign to educate voters about new voting processes, and
 - PPE and sanitation equipment.

WISCONSIN

- **Allocation:** \$7,362,345
- **Elections within period of grant availability:** Presidential primary on April 7; 7th Congressional District Special Election on May 12; State primary on August 11
- **Request Letter/Initial plan for spending funds:**
 - Procuring and distributing sanitation supplies, providing absentee ballot envelopes for the primary.
 - Development of the statewide voter registration system and online absentee ballot request portal to incorporate intelligent barcodes and increase system capacities.
 - Additional costs by local election officials such as printing absentee envelopes and ballots as well as postage costs.
- **Has the state reported how funds were spent:** Yes

- [20 day report for April 7 Presidential preference primary](#)
 - The Wisconsin Elections Commission (WEC) worked with the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) to gather sanitation equipment and PPE. The Wisconsin National Guard helped with packaging and distributing materials from the stockpile in Madison to county offices.
 - Jurisdictions reported having adequate supplies and voters reported feeling safe. Some locations had excess supplies which were used for the special election.
 - More than 80% of voters casted an absentee ballot by mail. Usually it is less than 10%. Clerks had already purchased absentee ballots and envelopes based on previous expectations. Shortages in the paper supply chain made it difficult to accommodate new demand. The WEC and SEOC worked to procure necessary paper.
 - Staff shortages: “In a large election there are between 20,000-30,000 poll workers needed statewide...municipalities reported a shortage of more than 7,000 poll workers. One hundred and eleven jurisdictions described their shortages as critical, defined as not being able to staff any polling places.
 - WEC urged the state to assign state personnel to work the polls, press releases were released and events put on to encourage Wisconsinites to volunteer. Put up a feature on the MyVote website to sign up for becoming a poll worker. Wisconsin statute requires poll worker training, and this is usually done by municipal clerks. WEC quickly produced an online, video-form training curriculum for people signing up to work at the polls. The National Guard was also authorized to serve in plain clothes as poll workers.
- [20 day report for the May 12 7th Congressional District Special Election](#)
 - Mostly sanitation equipment. Low cost