Written Testimony from Cuyahoga County Board of Elections'

Director Pat McDonald

Cuyahoga County is located in the northeast region of Ohio and includes the Cleveland metropolitan area. As the largest county in Ohio and the 15th largest in the Nation we have 886,861 registered voters. For a countywide election the agency hires approximately 6,000 Election Day workers to work at the 1,047 precincts that are held in 410 polling locations throughout 59 municipalities.

Since 2006, Cuyahoga County has made multiple equipment changes. After HAVA was enacted the Cuyahoga County Board of Elections transitioned from a paper based punch card system to TSX digital recording machines. The DRE machines and associated software were unable to accommodate the size and complexity of Cuyahoga's ballot styles and the county was forced to abandon the equipment and purchase another system. In 2008, Cuyahoga County began using paper ballots and the use of the optical scan system that is currently used.

Cuyahoga County encounters significant challenges in each election. Whether it is ballot layout difficulties, poll worker training changes, difficulties in finding quality polling location leadership, advisory groups with competing interests, equipment changes, language assistance requirements, in house voting hour disputes, or unknown delivery logistics each election proves to hold its own unique dilemma that complicates how the election is administered.

These challenges are magnified every four years as the county prepares itself for a Presidential Election. While in many elections we will face one or two challenges, we most often face even more in a large scale election such as a Presidential Primary or a Presidential General. Turnout increases and with this so do the number of unknowns. Ballot supplies are tested, the voting equipment is met with capacity issues, and despite our best efforts, we can only make so many predictions of what issues we will face once the polls open at 6:30 a.m.

During a debriefing of the November 2012 election, we discover several difficulties were encountered during the General Election. Hundreds of voters lined

up in the cold weather even prior to the polling locations opening. Once the polls opened at 6:30 a.m. and voters entered the location, they most often were unaware of what precinct they needed to go to in order to receive a ballot. Poll workers were assigned to greet these voters and look them up to direct them to their correct table, but many voters were not on the list at all and were then directed to the Voter Assistance Table so another poll worker could call the Board of Elections to determine if the voter was in the correct location. The lines started to grow at the Voter Assistance Table due to a high number of voters that had not updated their address information or had requested an absentee ballot and had not returned it and therefore needed to vote a Provisional Ballot. Lines also grew at the sign in table and these lines became unclear and voters were often queuing to sign in for a precinct that they should not have been. Once voters received their ballots they had to wait in line for a privacy booth as the voters before them took their time voting the lengthy ballot that contained numerous issues that took up columns of text. Lines between the voting machines and sign in tables became intertwined and more confusion ensued.

From what I gathered, Polling Location Coordinators struggled to organize voters and poll workers struggled to keep up with the high volume of voter traffic flowing throughout the location. In order to process voters more quickly poll workers often deviated from procedures. They allowed voters to sign the wrong poll book, stub numbers and signatures were not recorded in the Alphabetical Poll Book, they did not fill out all required sections of the provisional envelopes, or they did not call the Board of Elections prior to providing a provisional voter a ballot to ensure the voter was in the correct location.

It is obvious to me as the Director that Cuyahoga County dedicates a large amount of time to finding quality polling locations that will adequately house voters not only in smaller elections, but also in these larger elections when their capacity is tested. However, we face many hurdles in acquiring locations. Schools refuse to allow us to house a polling location in their facilities due to safety concerns. Many other facilities are unavailable based on the stringent ADA requirements a polling location facility must meet for the parking lots and the ramps to be ADA compliant. The current Federal and State guidelines state that polling location

parking lots cannot have a slope more than 2% in any direction in any parking space. This has caused us to move out of several voting locations. Allowing a 4% slope or providing some variance would help the agency keep many polling locations.

We could lessen the burden placed on Boards of Elections by reviewing the current ADA requirements for polling locations and by encouraging or requiring public facilities to serve as polling locations for elections in their municipalities. We would also encourage legislation requiring schools to coordinate their in-service days with Election Days so that students would not be in the buildings and any safety concerns would be alleviated.

We could also address polling location capacity issues by implementing recruitment programs to encourage persons with skill sets that would be applicable to these situations to apply to serve as poll workers on Election Day. Boards of Elections continue to face difficulties in finding quality poll workers. Poll workers are required to work many hours for little net pay, which does not entice most eligible citizens to assist on Election Day. Election Day procedures are ever changing whether it is updated equipment, technology or processes, making it difficult to find poll workers who can learn quickly and stay up to date on poll worker responsibilities. While poll workers are available to fill all slots, these individuals may not always be the best suited to handle the stress they face on Election Day and are often unable to troubleshoot through issues that arise.

In my opinion, we can lessen the pressure on our polling locations and Election Day officials by expanding our vote by mail efforts. In the November 2012 General Election the Board had a total 221,585 vote by mail ballots cast, which was only 34% of the total 650,437 ballots cast. By increasing voter awareness of vote by mail options by sending mailers to registered voters or informing voters who visit the Board's web-site and especially reaching out to those voters who are less able to make it to their polling location on Election Day will help alleviate pressure on poll workers. Cuyahoga County should encourage legislation and funding to send all registered voters a Vote by Mail Application to all voters throughout the state prior to each statewide and general election.

If legislation were to be passed in Ohio, the implementation of voter centers would bring forth sweeping change in the way that elections would be conducted within Cuyahoga County. Vote centers are larger polling locations where a voter may vote, without regard to the precinct in which the voter resides. Instead of using traditional neighborhood precincts, voters would have the option of voting at any one of the larger, strategically placed polling sites throughout the county on Election Day.

Vote Centers would be implemented in two different forms: Election Day Vote Centers and early Vote Centers. There are several benefits to the implementation of these types of centers which include staffing the centers with experienced and knowledgeable workers. Workers would receive specialized training and recruited for specific job placement. Well trained staff ensures voters are treated fairly and receive accurate information, in turn reducing the amount of errors that occur overall.

The amount of provisional ballots cast would drastically be reduced, since information is pulled directly from the voter database, practically eliminating human error in the process. Voters registered at their correct address will always receive the correct ballot. This practice will drastically reduce the volume of phone calls the BOE receives on a daily basis as well as Election Day. In turn the amount of stock piling pre-printed ballots will also be reduced as voters who visit voting centers have the ability to print their ballots at the location.

Another benefit of the addition of voting centers is the expansion of early voting options for registered voters. An increase in the amount of places voters could cast their early vote, would increase the amount of people that would participate in the early voting process. If early voting is offered at multiple locations besides the BOE, that multiples the amount of real hours available for people to vote, in turn increasing voter turnout.

Finally, the strategic placement of voting centers is another benefit to the program since it is flexible and accounts for population density and demographics. Due to the effects of suburban sprawl within Cuyahoga County, voters usually work in

different areas than where they are registered. The implementation of voting centers could potentially increase voter turnout for any given election. Voting Centers help cater to the needs of the voter ensuring that they are given every opportunity to cast their ballot.

Cleaner voter registration records will also alleviate the issues faced by poll workers on Election Day. Voters are often unaware that they cannot update their voter registration by simply filling out a change of address form with the Post Office and often arrive at their polling location on Election Day without having submitting an address update for their registration. These voters are then required to travel to their new location and precinct to vote a provisional ballot. Education and outreach prior to each election alerting voters of the importance of updating their records prior to the close of registration would result in more accurate Alphabetical Poll Books and less provisional ballots.

We can also address the amount of time spent voting a ballot by limiting the length of the ballot language. We also believe this text should be submitted in a reading level that can be understood by the average voter. Furthermore, in Cuyahoga County we are required to offer a multi-language ballot and all races must be displayed in English and Spanish. The amount of space, the lengthy issue language and the ballot length almost doubles leading to errors when poll workers hand out a multi page ballot and expenses associated to printing and delivery costs.

Many of the challenges faced by Boards of Elections throughout the state of Ohio are based on the unknowns of Election Day. While we cannot prepare for the unforeseen issues of the day, we can learn from the challenges faced in the elections that have passed. We ask the government to consider the challenges we described and offer any assistance they can in alleviating these burdens.