



**House State Government Committee  
September 25, 2008 – 2:30 p.m.  
Ethical Society of Philadelphia  
1906 South Rittenhouse Square**

**Testimony of Deputy Secretary Harry VanSickle  
Pennsylvania Department of State**

**2008 General Election Preparations**

Chairwoman Josephs, Chairman Baker and distinguished members of the House State Government Committee:

Good afternoon. Thank you for the invitation to appear before the Committee to discuss the Department's preparations for the 2008 General Election.

The Department of State was asked prior to the Primary whether we were prepared to administer the election. In fact, there were concerns about the readiness of state and county officials. At a hearing of this committee earlier in the year, Secretary Cortés outlined the actions and best practices the state and counties were implementing in order to meet the challenges of a high-turnout Primary. I am pleased to report the hard work and collaboration led to an Election Day that was relatively problem-free.

In fact, Pennsylvania's success was touted by Gracia Hillman, a commissioner for the U.S. Election Assistance Commission. In her Op-Ed that appeared in the April 28, 2008, edition of *Roll Call*, she stated:

"The collaborative, proactive approach Pennsylvania applied to its primary is one that I hope all of us will adopt to prepare for the record number of voters who will make their voices heard in November."

The Rendell Administration is committed to eliminating barriers to voting as well as conducting fair, accurate, accessible and secure elections for all Pennsylvanians. This year's elections include the presidential campaign as well as the vital races for state House and Senate, Attorney General, Auditor General, Treasurer and Congress. The Department of State, working closely with the commonwealth's 67 counties, is building upon the lessons of the primary to prepare for November 4.

My testimony will cover the following election-related matters:

- The Statewide Uniform Registry of Electors and voter registration;
- Voter education,
- Poll worker training
- Voting system integrity and security and
- Election Day activities.

## **The Statewide Uniform Registry of Electors and Voter Registration**

The first matter I would like to discuss is the status of the Statewide Uniform Registry of Electors, more commonly referred to as SURE, and voter registration. SURE is the centralized voter registration and election management system used by the counties and the Department to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the Commonwealth's voter registration records. All 67 counties have used SURE since 2006.

Over the last two years the Department has worked diligently to increase the system's capacity to process records. During the primary the SURE system performed well and enhancements continue to be implemented. SURE stores voter records, and first time registrants are also checked through a separate process controlled by the Social Security Administration. This extra check assists counties with verifying registrants information and eliminating duplicate applications.

The Department continues to develop services that provide greater access to available technology and data. These services are called "SURE portals." The public portal allows voters to find their own registration and polling place information on the Department's Web site. The county portal enables elections staff to view and certify voter registration statistics, enter and track provisional ballots and enter election night returns. The innovative use of technology gives counties increased flexibility for more employees to enter voter registration data. This additional data entry capability is helping counties complete the task of entering new voter applications.

With less than two weeks until the Oct. 6 registration deadline, more than 8.5 million Pennsylvanians are registered to vote in the election and thousands are submitting their applications. County preparation and sufficient staffing, coupled with SURE technology, will benefit voters by streamlining the process and, ultimately, providing confirmations of their registrations in a timely manner.

The Department also has aided the process by working with advocacy groups and organizations that hold voter registration drives to improve and standardize the voter registration forms and process.

In addition, voter registration applications received at the Department of State are now mailed overnight to the counties in order to expedite the registration process. This quick turnaround began Sept. 22 and is in effect until the receipt of the last application postmarked Oct. 6.

### **Voter education**

In terms of education, the Department continues to implement *Ready.Set.Vote.*, an interactive voter education campaign that features television, radio, print, online and out-of-home advertising, outreach efforts and a revised version of our interactive Web site, [VotesPa.com](http://VotesPa.com). Advertising is reaching many audiences, including military members and persons with disabilities. Specific ads were created in Chinese, Korean, and Spanish. The campaign's goal is to ensure that Pennsylvania voters are familiar with voting processes, rights and technology.

The Department has issued news releases and provided interviews with media to explain the qualifications and process to register to vote. More announcements are planned as we approach Nov. 4, including special reminders about tips for going to the polls and best times to vote.

As we did in the primary, the Department is also reaching out to university presidents to communicate guidelines for college voters, as many of the students may be voting for the first time.

A special message and news release was issued to members of our armed forces explaining the process for military and overseas voters and highlighting a new tool for requesting and receiving an absentee ballot. In August, the Rendell Administration reviewed an innovative, secure online tool offered by the Federal Voting Assistance Program at the Department of Defense that provides military as well as overseas civilian voters the option of requesting and/or receiving absentee ballots electronically through the federal program's Web site. The administration notified the organization that Pennsylvania would allow and encourage its counties to use the tool because it helps simplify the process. As of today, 36 counties, including Philadelphia and Allegheny, are participating.

## **Poll worker training**

In Pennsylvania we currently have more than 9,200 voting precincts, 50,000 poll workers and 8.5 million registered voters. The large volume of voters also magnifies the importance of poll worker training. Historically, issues that have arisen during election day have been primarily due to human error. Adequate poll worker training can minimize errors and ensure that the elections are administered smoothly.

This year, the Department of State produced a new DVD titled, *Election Officials Training Program*. This video was made available to all counties to supplement their training efforts and is also available to view online by visiting the Department's Web site, [www.dos.state.pa.us](http://www.dos.state.pa.us), and selecting Elections. A second video was produced in September with emphasis on training to election officials to assist voters with disabilities. The Department anticipates the final video will be available by the end of next week.

## **Voting system integrity and security**

Voting system integrity and security is the next critical issue that the Commonwealth and counties continue to address. For the Nov. 4 election, 51 counties will use DREs, 12 counties will use optical scan, and four counties will use both DREs and optical scan systems.

The Department has recommended public viewing of election system preparation and testing, as transparency of the process is a key component of demonstrating voting system integrity. Establishing a well guarded and documented chain of custody and providing physical security of voting systems before, during and after the election also are critical steps to secure the electoral process.

### **Election Day activities**

Building upon best practices that were implemented in the primary, the Department continues to communicate to the counties recommendations for handling high voter turnout. Sufficient staffing throughout the entire process is key, as well as ordering ample supplies of absentee ballots and optical scan ballots in the counties that require them.

The Department is notifying counties of any precincts with 100 or more newly registered voters. New voters or voters who moved and live in a different precinct are required to bring a form of photo or non-photo identification. By knowing about the higher concentration of voters required to provide identification, counties can plan staffing levels accordingly. The Department is also scheduling pre-recorded phone messages prior to the election to remind these voters to bring identification.

Given the volume of new registrations and the heightened interest in this election, the Department has discussed with County Election Directors on various occasions the need for contingency planning to meet the potential increased demand for provisional ballots as well as the importance of having a sufficient supply of emergency ballots. In addition, counties are customarily reminded to be prepared to handle unexpected polling place emergencies, such as power outages, inclement weather, fires, water damage and flooding.

Staff members who are experts on specific topics will be ready and available during Election Day to provide assistance to the counties and to the public on issues ranging from basic questions to complex legal issues. Implementing another best practice that worked well in April, the Department of State is making available communication liaisons to serve the counties on Nov. 4. The liaisons will be trained by Department and county staff and will be on-site in each county to provide an additional communications channel between the counties and the Commonwealth during a likely high turnout Election Day.

Improvements also continue in reporting of unofficial election results after the close of the polls. For the April Primary, a direct interface for electronic reporting using the SURE county portal was employed by 21 counties. More than 50 counties will participate in November. In addition, a team of Department staff will work with county staff to expedite the reporting of election returns on the Department's Web site.

Based on all of these preparations, I am confident the Department and the counties will be well prepared for the General Election. I am also confident we will have a well-informed electorate.



In closing, I thank you for your interest and support of the Department's election preparation efforts. We look forward to continuing to work with you and with the counties to ensure fair, accurate, accessible and secure elections for the voters of Pennsylvania.

Thank you for your invitation. I welcome your questions at this time.

