

HOUSE STATE GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE HEARING
March 24, 2021 ZOOM

COMMENTS ON ELECTION DAY OPERATIONS AND SATELLITE OFFICES

Election day operations have changed drastically due to the passage of Acts 77 and 12. We now deal with two different elections on the same day. In one of the elections, we are quite proficient. The other we are learning to become proficient in carrying out. Please let me elaborate.

The first election we have carried out for generations, that being the precinct method of voting. Everyone wishing to vote in person, would report to their assigned polling place and sign the poll book. With the advent of the voter verifiable auditable paper ballot, the voter would be given an appropriate ballot and proceed to a voting station in the inner space of the poll and make his selections on the ballot by blackening an oval next to the candidate of their choice. The voter would then personally place his ballot on the electronic scan in each precinct and ballot would be scanned and automatically placed in a secured ballot box attached to the scanner. The voter leaves knowing he made his selections and submitted their ballot to be tallied with all the ballots. There are occasions where a voter will be asked to complete other forms for the voter registration office. Now with the advent of 77 and 12, a voter may surrender their mail in ballot package and vote in person. Other voters who wish to vote in person but had a mail in ballot issued, may request a provisional ballot to complete and surrender to the polling officials.

These last few changes have caused a fair amount of confusion to the voter as well as poll workers who have been trained to handle the various scenarios. I believe that these changes and the extra work to handle the extra ballots has led to better than 50% vacancies on the 2021 ballot for the elected position of Judge of Election and Majority and Minority Inspector. This puts a tremendous burden on all election offices in the same predicament to fill such a large number of vacancies for each subsequent election.

Filling vacancies is only half the battle. The election offices must then train inexperienced people in a critical phase of the democratic process. Increasing remuneration for the day is not the answer for a sixteen-hour day.

The second election on election day involves the pre-canvass and canvass of mail in and absentee ballots. We start pre-canvass at 7AM. Automatic letter openers are moved into the designated area along racks with mail type trays of ballots already sorted by precinct and in alphabetical order. The ballots are opened and given to teams of inspectors to separate the secrecy envelope from the outer envelope. Naked ballots and secrecy envelopes with identifying marks are set aside as containing fatal defects. The secrecy envelopes are then opened and the ballots are removed, flattened and secured in precinct order ready for canvassing. At the appropriate time, the ballots are scanned on high-speed scanners and again secured in precinct order. Results are combined with in person ballots and the results reported to the appropriate persons, DOS, and on the internet.

This second election is going on at the same time issues are resolved in the first election. This places an additional burden on the election staff to oversee both elections at the same time. Additional personnel will be needed to carry out the second election. Investments have been made in the necessary equipment to carry out the task. Counties experience higher labor costs. Finding qualified individuals to address the needs of both elections again takes additional time.

Stress levels are at an all-time high for election directors. As a result, there has been a turnover rate of better than 25% for key election personnel and will continue by year's end to 30% or more. Decades of knowledge and experience are lost and weakens the process until everyone is back up to speed.

Something needs to change!

Satellite offices present a host of new issues and problems. For starters, most counties can not afford the additional cost of a satellite office. Additional personnel, rent, equipment to name a few considerations.

Satellite offices would be manned multiple days for a given period. An investment in additional equipment would include a ballot on demand printer and computer with the election loaded in it. This raises issues of security at the site. Real time processing is not available in Pennsylvania, therefore, safeguards must be in place to prevent multiple ballots or registration records when operating more than one satellite office.

A major concern with satellite offices is there is no specific authority in the election code to establish them. Legislation would need drafted, passed and disseminated to each county as to the operation of such offices. Lawrence County will not operate satellite offices until authority is in statute.

Once again, the legislature must be cognizant of burdening counties with yet another unfunded mandate.