



THE WEAK LINK:

POLL WORKERS --- THEIR RECRUITMENT, TRAINING, AND MANAGEMENT

A Paper Presented to Nina Mitchell Wells, Secretary of State

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“That is the weak link in the whole system -- the poll workers.”
New Jersey election official, July 2008

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PREFACE:

As the November general election approaches, voters around the country are concerned about whether new voting methods (i.e., electronic recording devices or paper ballots counted by an optical scan machine) and those responsible for distributing and administering such equipment and ballots will be able to handle the large number of voters expected to come to the polls, will record their votes accurately, and will essentially facilitate the voting process rather than create barriers. Everyone agrees that a large factor in whether the voting process goes smoothly, regardless of the type of technology employed, is the availability of properly trained poll workers who know the rules of the ballot box and can provide appropriate guidance when voters are unfamiliar with the type of ballot employed or the design of the ballot, or are not found in the poll books. Indeed, in an article appearing on the front page of the N.Y. Times on July 21, 2008 entitled “Influx of Voters Expected to Test New Technology,” Rosemary E. Rodriquez, chairwomen of the United States Election Assistance Commission, which oversees voting around the country, stated: “So much depends on whether there will be enough poll workers, whether they are trained enough and whether their state and local election directors give them contingency plans and resources to handle the unexpected.”

Despite their central role in making elections fair and efficient for all citizens, poll workers have become somewhat invisible, and occasionally objects of unfair ridicule. Voters often complain of elderly poll workers who are incompetent, inefficient or simply do not know their jobs. This stereotype ignores the administrative support system that is behind poll workers and the system's responsibility to make sure that everyone does their job right. We posit that poll workers stand at the interface between the citizen and his government; they should be well-informed, helpful, and alert. A poll worker should affirm by his or her presence and behavior the legitimacy, value, and dignity of the voting process. This norm can be achieved statewide, however, only if proper training and resources are provided.

Toward this end, New Jersey Appleseed Public Interest Law Center set out to determine how each county in our state recruits poll workers, trains them, and deploys them on Election Day. We also wanted to hear from election officials as to what they believe works well and what they would like to see changed. Accordingly, we conducted a telephone survey of officials in the twenty-one counties in July, 2008. In the spirit of assisting New Jersey election officials in improving the administration of elections, we offer recommendations for poll worker recruitment, training and management based on information gathered in the course of our survey. The paper begins with a brief statutory framework, followed by summaries from the telephone survey and our conclusions and suggestions for enhanced performance.

STATUTORY FRAMEWORK:

New Jersey's statutes governing poll workers are set forth in N.J.S.A. 19:6-1 et seq., and provide a very detailed framework regarding the appointment of poll workers, necessary qualifications, assignment, removal, decision-making at the polling place, training, penalties for misconduct, and compensation. For purposes herein, we will focus on qualifications, training and compensation.

Pursuant to N.J.S.A. 19:6-2, all legal voters and those residents who are age 16 or 17 (with parental permission) are able to apply for appointment “as a member of a district board of any municipality in the county in which he or she resides”-- *i.e.*, a poll worker. This relatively new provision now permits high school students to apply to serve as poll workers. Despite this expansion of the pool of potential recruits, members of any district board must still be equally apportioned between the two existing political parties, and only if the county board is unable to fill all the positions of a particular district board from among qualified members of these two parties is it permitted to appoint an unaffiliated person. Unaffiliated persons, including high school students, are limited to two persons per district at any given time. N.J.S.A. 19:6-3. Members are appointed for one year or until their successors are appointed, N.J.S.A. 19:6-8; may be removed, with or without cause, N.J.S.A. 19:6-5, and are compensated at a rate of \$200 per day (\$125 of which the county is reimbursed for by the state). N.J.S.A. 19:45-6.2(a). The state must also reimburse counties for any additional costs they incur as a result of the provisions regarding poll workers, *id.* at 45-6.2(b), and the Help America Vote Act of 2002 authorizes “substantial amounts of federal aid to the states to [*inter alia*] fund the . . . better training of poll workers.” N.J.S.A. 19:61-1(c).

From 1945 to 2005, the training and certification of poll workers was within the jurisdiction of the county boards of election with no supervision or input from the state. See N.J.S.A. 19:50-1 (ch. 56, 1945) and amendments thereto in 1947 and 1987. In 2005, the state, for the first time, required the county boards of election to “design, prepare and distribute training manuals for district board members, pursuant to guidelines established by the Attorney General,” now the Secretary of State. N.J.S.A. 19:50-1(a). The Attorney General was also required “to design, prepare and distribute training manuals for members of county boards of election, and county clerks.” *Id.* at 1(b). Though a modest involvement, such requirements are a first step in promoting uniformity of training among counties.

At this time, county boards of election are also responsible for ensuring that new poll workers are “instructed in the conduct of elections, and in their duties in connection therewith,” (not just in the use of the machines as previous versions of the statute specified), and all poll workers are required to attend “said instructional sessions for each election at least once every two years.” *Id.* at 1(a). The statute specifies that each poll worker who receives such training and “is fully qualified to properly conduct the election” should receive a “certificate” to that effect, but it does not require counties to administer tests to such persons or other form of performance review. *Id.*

Although each county is following the law stated above, we believe that there needs to be more state supervision of county instructional programs to ensure uniformity of standards and improved poll worker performance. Based on our survey set forth below, we recommend that the state, at a minimum, require counties to require annual training and that, further, the state administer a standard test on an annual basis to ensure that poll workers throughout the state understand the voting process, the rights of voters and challengers at the polling site, the different types of ballots, and their responsibilities in conducting the election.

SUMMARIES:

ATLANTIC COUNTY

Recruitment Election officials in Atlantic County expressed a particular interest in using 16- and 17-year olds, and are actively recruiting them through the high schools in five (5) towns. They noted that such recruitment efforts sometimes bring in the parents of the recruits as well. Officials have found over the years that they have shortages of workers in one party or the other for which they use unaffiliated workers to supplement the recommendations from the local party chairs of the relevant municipal party committees.

Training New workers must attend a class within 30 days prior to an election. They offer evening and weekend classes for all poll workers.

Master poll workers They now use “area leaders,” bi-partisan teams that visit polling places, trouble-shoot, and report back. This practice has cut down on problems at polling places.

Language Some districts within the county require bilingual Spanish/English speakers, who are sometimes difficult to recruit.

BERGEN COUNTY

Recruitment Election officials in Bergen County send out numerous postcards to registered members of the Democratic and Republican Parties soliciting applications for membership on district boards. They have found that poll worker solicitation notices in newspapers are not very effective. Four people at the Board of Elections divide up the 70 towns in the county for recruitment. There is no role for the political parties – the Board selects its workers. All workers must be registered voters. They do not recruit among high school students.

Training The typical poll worker in the county is a senior. The election official with whom we spoke candidly noted that many such seniors do not know how to operate the DRE voting machines used in the county since the late 1990s, and they often are reluctant to give voters provisional ballots. It was noted that it would be helpful if they could recruit younger workers who were more familiar with electronic equipment generally.

Master poll workers The County uses a system of monitors to receive complaints on Election Day, but these monitors do not go out to polling places.

Language In addition to sending recruiting postcards to registered party members, the Board of Election sends cards to both Spanish- and Korean-speaking voters who reside in election districts where bilingual poll workers in these languages are required.

BURLINGTON COUNTY

Recruitment Election officials maintain two (2) pools of poll workers, segregated by political party. Some municipal party chairs send lists of people whom they recommend to serve as poll workers; others do not. The Board of Elections sometimes uses ads in local press; however, they attest that they usually have a sufficient number of people applying. Most of those who apply have previously served.

Training The Board of Elections runs classes for new workers before every election in both the fall and spring. Workers who have been previously certified often attend classes as well. In their instruction, the county election officials emphasize the use of provisional ballots and urge workers to call the Board of Elections promptly with problems. Although they talk about locating a voter’s correct polling place in the classes, they also expect workers to call the Board when such problems arise.

Master poll workers Burlington County uses master poll workers who circulate among polling places on Election Day.

Language Election officials reported that there is no need for bilingual material or poll workers in this county.

CAMDEN COUNTY

Recruitment In Camden County, election officials work with the local political party committees, who send them the same people year after year. “Without those lists we would be stuck,” said one official we spoke to. In other words, they believe that without political party cooperation they would be unable to find a sufficient number of workers. They send a letter to registered voters in towns where they need people requesting their service, but do not advertise in the papers. They have an informational brochure that describes the job of poll workers in municipal offices, DMV agencies. To date, they have not recruited high school students.

Training All workers must attend a 2 - 2 1/2 hour class every two (2) years.

Master poll workers The County employs a group of master poll workers whom they call “Deputy Commissioners.” They recruit these workers through the political parties and the commissioners have the final say as to appointment. Such workers get a 4-hour class and carry (from site to site) a folder in which they record problems as well as giving assistance on site.

Language In Camden County, they need bilingual workers primarily in Atlantic City; recruitment thereof has not been difficult.

CAPE MAY COUNTY

Recruitment Cape May election officials actively recruit high school students to be engaged in the election process. In addition to registering two (2) voters each, students have worked successfully at polling stations educating older poll workers as well as voters about how the relatively new electronic machines work. The county advertises in local papers and has had no problem with shortages. They also get lists of recommended workers from the political parties.

Training A Power Point presentation is mandatory for all workers every year. Election officials assert that this new method of instruction has cut down on errors. In cases where they find, upon reviewing the poll books after the election, that a district has made mistakes, all four (4) workers from that district must attend an additional class prior to working another election.

Master poll workers Cape May County has used master poll workers at the Board of Elections and in the Municipal Clerks’ offices on Election Days. They also circulate among polling places on Election Day.

Language Two towns need bilingual Spanish workers, and recruitment thereof has not been an issue for the County.

CUMBERLAND COUNTY

Recruitment Cumberland County election officials reach out to the political parties for names of people who may serve as a poll worker as they need them. The Board reciprocates by sending the party committees lists of registered voters, as well as information on deadlines, challengers, and so forth.

Training The election officials believe that they need to teach new people how to use the machines and this seems to be the main use of classes in this county. They tell workers to use provisional ballots for voters whose names are not in the book, but do not seem to expect them to

know how to look up a voter's correct polling place. They "sort it out later" at the Board of Elections. Two classes are scheduled for August to review machine operation.

Master poll workers They county does use master poll workers who receive a more intense training. Such workers are able to help with such matters as looking up a voter's polling station. They have a check list to make sure the polling places are set up properly--signs up, expected workers present, and so on--and they return at the end of the day to remind workers to pull the cartridge and complete the paperwork.

Language It is a bilingual county, and recruitment of Spanish speaking poll workers has not been difficult.

ESSEX COUNTY

Recruitment The chairs of the municipal Democratic and Republican parties send lists or telephone names of people to be poll workers to the Board of Elections. Most people are seniors since they have found it difficult to get working people. Occasionally, they have put an ad in the paper. The County also uses high school students in some districts.

Training Workers must attend a class every two years unless there is something new in the procedure. Then all workers are required to attend a class.

Master poll workers: They do use master poll workers who circulate among polling places on Election Day.

Language Bilingual poll workers who are needed in some districts are also recruited through the political parties.

GLOUCESTER COUNTY

Recruitment The party chairs in each town submit names to the Board of Elections. To date, they have had no shortages of workers. Most people attend the class every year, although the Title 19 requirement is once every two years. The county does not use high school students since they are able to work only half a day due to labor laws.

Training A Power Point program on file can be down-loaded by workers to view at home. They hold classes before elections and try to keep classes small (20-30).

Master poll workers: The county does not employ master poll workers. Instead, they have a judge at the Board of Elections on Election Day who is able to answer poll workers' questions. They also instruct poll workers to call the Board of Elections when a voter's name is not in the book rather than looking up his/her correct polling station themselves. They believe that it is easier to ensure correct information this way.

Language Bilingual election services are not applicable in this county.

HUDSON COUNTY

Recruitment In this county there is never a dearth of poll workers who are registered Democrats. They have found that ads in newspapers and letters to political party chairs do not bring them new recruits. Accordingly, they typically employ unaffiliated voters to fill in the two positions otherwise reserved for Republicans. Sometimes, but not often, party committee people recommend workers. The Board of Elections maintains a pool of 25-30 workers who report to the central office early on Election Day to fill in for no-shows. Normally, these workers are all assigned and working in polling places by 11 a.m.

Training Classes are mandatory every 2 years, unless there is something new with respect to the process and then all workers are required to attend. The class instructor discusses subjects in the

manual, and demonstrates use of the machine. Despite the mandatory nature of the training, the county lets experienced workers work even if they have not attended the class; they enforce class attendance only for new workers.

Master poll workers Master poll workers are used in known “trouble spots”—JC, West NY, Bayonne, Hoboken, Kearney. They check to see that machines are running, enough poll workers are on the job, signs are posted.

Language There are many bilingual Spanish districts in this county. The county does not have trouble recruiting Spanish speaking poll workers; however, sometimes, such workers do not speak English proficiently, although they may have checked on the application form that they do.

HUNTERDON COUNTY

Recruitment In Hunterdon, most of the poll workers have been doing it for years. They use part-time as well as full-time workers. They do use high school students. They also advertise in the local papers and on their web site. Municipal Clerks put out a newsletter with an application form included. Poll workers often recommend other workers.

Training Workers are required to take a class every two (2) years. They distribute a manual to workers, but do not test them as to familiarity with content thereof.

Master poll workers They use one in every polling station as one of the four workers at each table. The master workers are expected to be able to answer most of the questions that come up. They get somewhat higher pay, and are usually long-serving poll workers.

Language Bilingual election services are not required in this county.

MERCER COUNTY

Recruitment Mercer County uses high school seniors fairly extensively, though they depend upon the schools to decide whether to participate in this program. Teachers, usually of honors classes, recommend student poll workers. A recruitment letter also goes out to several non-profit organizations in April and September. A flyer announcing the need for poll workers goes to various agencies such as libraries, party organizations, senior centers, and church groups.

Applications are on the County's web site, and political party chairs also send names.

Training The county provides a one-hour session a week or two before the election. There is a short welcome, followed by a demonstration of how to use the machine (15 min.) They teach workers about challenges, voters not in the book, absentee voters who show up at polls, etc. There is an informal test on machine operation, but no test on other material presented.

Master poll workers In November, master board workers will be assigned to visit a number of districts each.

Language The county needs to provide bilingual Spanish speaking poll workers in Trenton. Recruitment of such workers has not created difficulties.

MIDDLESEX COUNTY

Recruitment According to election officials, recruitment is primarily an informal process of word of mouth. The county also does some public announcements on local cable channels. There are typically voter registration drives at local high schools, but few students have indicated a willingness to work the polls on Election Day.

Training The county offers a one-hour class with a brief introduction followed by a 30-min. Power Point presentation which is also printed for trainees to take home, in addition to the

manual. Refresher sessions are offered on the Saturday before elections. People are taught use of machines.

Master poll workers They do not currently use them, but expressed an interest in creating such a program.

Language A bilingual county under federal law. Recruitment of Spanish speakers is not a problem. However, there are several districts within the county with a growing Chinese-speaking population. The County, however, has not accommodated such voters.

MONMOUTH COUNTY

Recruitment Recruitment in this county is done mostly by word of mouth, though some towns have the poll worker application on their municipal web sites. One town sends recruiting information with its tax bill. The county does not use high school students.

Training This year, one session was held on Sept. 22, at 7p.m. At the session, poll workers are given hands-on work with the machines—4 to 5 machines with 10 people on each. On Election Day, each worker has a kit that explains the operation of the machine. They also have roving tech people on Election Day. Workers are urged to give provisional ballots where needed.

Master poll workers No information provided.

Language Poll workers speak only English.

MORRIS COUNTY

Recruitment In Morris County this election cycle they have had “posters all over town” (e.g. grocery stores, post offices, many public places) in an effort to increase their numbers of poll workers because they anticipate shortages. As of the date of the interview (mid-July), the response was excellent. The County is starting a program to recruit college students to serve as poll workers, and sometimes the political parties send names of potential applicants to the Board of Election. In general there is a low turnover of workers.

Training The Board of Elections runs classes before every election. During the months of July and August this year, they had a program of classes every day at the Fire and Police Academy one of which they require all poll workers to attend. All workers are tested on machine operation before being permitted to work.

Master poll workers They have a new program with master poll workers who will go around to all polling stations twice on Election Day, check on operations and report any problems to Board of Education.

Language A few towns need bilingual Spanish speakers pursuant to state law. Recruitment of such workers has not been a problem.

OCEAN COUNTY

Recruitment In Ocean County, the election officials get names of potential poll workers from the municipal party committee chairs. They also send a recruitment mailing to all voters who participated in the previous Primary Election and they use eligible high school students who are 18, registered, and thus can work a full day.

Training The county conducts a 3-hour session that is divided into 3 parts: set-up, emergency and provisional ballots, machine operation. Workers are given hand-outs at the training session to be taken home. Workers are encouraged to hand out provisional ballots—“if in doubt, hand it out.”

Master poll workers Both master poll workers and members of the Boards of Election travel among districts on Election Day.

Language No information provided.

PASSAIC COUNTY

Recruitment Recruitment in this county is done primarily by word of mouth. Application forms and pamphlets are at Municipal Clerks' and County Commissioners' offices. Typically, they have also received lists of potential workers from Democratic and Republican Party leaders.

Training Workers are required to attend a class every two years; however, the interviewee expressed the belief that the material is too complicated and confusing for people to remember clearly. Sometimes the workers forget things. Improvements in the training process itself are very much needed. Officials do the best they can, we were told, but workers are still inadequately prepared for what they may confront in the polling places.

Master poll workers The county has a new program where people with more training and more pay drive around to the polling stations to answer questions and trouble shoot. The county's initial assessment of this program is that it has been "somewhat helpful."

Language Some districts are bilingual Spanish/English. Recruitment of such workers has not created any difficulties.

SALEM COUNTY

Recruitment In Salem County, most poll workers are recommended to the Board of Elections by municipal party leaders. The county recruits poll workers in some towns by means of ads in local papers.

Training Election officials here offer three (3) sessions before a Primary Election and three (3) before the General Election. They tell poll workers to call the Board of Elections office if they have any problems on Election Day. They also distribute a manual to each worker, though there is no testing as to familiarity with content.

Master poll workers The county does not use master poll workers, but they are looking into it.

Language Only one town needs bilingual Spanish/English poll workers, and thus recruitment thereof has not been a problem.

SUSSEX COUNTY

Recruitment In Sussex, application forms are placed on line and at all polling places. There is a check-off to apply to be a poll worker on the voter registration form as well. The average length of service of poll workers is four (4) years, though some have worked for 10-15 years. According to the person interviewed, the average age of poll workers in this county is 65.

Training The county offers a 2-hour class once a year.

Master poll workers They do not use master poll workers but they do have "runners" who go to the polling places on Election Day. These people check to see that things are operating properly and report back any problems to the Board.

Language The county is not required to provide bilingual election services.

UNION COUNTY

Recruitment In Union County, some municipalities advertise in local papers for poll workers. In addition, municipal party chairs send the Board of Elections names of potential appointees. If

the County is not able to fill all seats with affiliated persons, then it uses unaffiliated voters who have applied and been certified.

Training Union County has for several years shown a film to poll workers that they have found works well insofar as information is better retained. They try to keep the classes small and convenient, since sometimes people nod off, and then get confused over such things as provisional ballots on Election Day. In a small class, the instructor can answer questions more individually and can notice when people lose attention.

Master poll workers They have master poll workers who go to each table with a print-out from the Board of Election that lists which poll workers should be at each site. They also check on people who may be there who should not be, and trouble-shoot as they are able to during the day on Election Day. This group has special training.

Language A majority of their districts are bilingual Spanish/English; recruitment of such poll workers has not created any special difficulties.

WARREN COUNTY

Recruitment In Warren, they have historically had poll worker shortages for each election. Nonetheless, they continue to rely on current and former poll workers to be their recruitment arm. Most workers have worked 20, 30, 40 years, and they don't want to retire. The county has found it difficult to attract people who are younger and still in the work force.

Training They offer classes, both during the day and in the evening, in which they go over the whole voting process from the time the polling sites are open. Then they divide people into small groups and have them open and close the machine.

Master poll workers No information provided.

Language No district is required to prepare election materials in another language.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Recruitment

As noted above, the typical New Jersey poll worker is a senior citizen whose name has been submitted by a local party chair to the County Board of Elections year after year. In general, the counties welcome the parties' submissions, and usually invite them. This arrangement has undoubtedly arisen in response to the counties' conscientious efforts to "balance" their poll workers between the two parties. The outcome of this process, however, is that, although poll workers are appointed by the County Boards of Elections, according to New Jersey election law, they are effectively chosen by the local party officials who recommend them to the counties. As long as counties get a sufficient number of workers in this way, they do not go to the trouble and expense of recruiting and training other people. The result in many cases is a closed process that is not hospitable to unaffiliated voters. This fact in itself feeds the perception that elections are not administered in a fair, nonpartisan manner.

Application forms are available Municipal Clerks' offices, Boards of Elections offices, town or county web sites, and some DMV offices, but few workers are recruited in this way. Some are recruited by word of mouth by current or former poll workers. Boards of Elections often say that advertising for workers in the local press "doesn't work." Thus, although several officials say they wish more people, especially younger people, were available, the counties rely on lists provided by municipal and county political parties to fill their poll worker positions. Only one county, Morris, has undertaken vigorous public outreach efforts this year to educate local residents about the process and to attract new people. This same county also had the most ambitious and energetic training program of all the counties. Posters "all over town" and classes every day for two months counts as exceptional effort.

We recommend that the state urge the counties to expand their recruitment activities and upgrade their public outreach to bring many more and different people into the pool of poll workers.

All polling stations must have sufficient numbers of poll workers to accommodate every voter in a reasonable time. Districts that anticipate unusually large turn-outs should have more than four workers at each table. If necessary, counties should recruit new poll workers directly from the community, including people who will have to take a day off work. Toward this end, the Boards of Elections should provide poll workers with a letter attesting to their service at the polling place.

The state should assist counties in identifying districts that may need additional workers and in facilitating the recruitment of workers from those districts.

A growing number counties (five by our count) use high school students as poll workers, and several seem satisfied with the results. One county, Cape May, used students at polling places to both educate voters and poll workers about the use of machines, and at the Board of Election on Election Day, as well as using them as poll workers. Some counties object to the

half day restriction for people under age 18. Some counties say they are thinking about recruiting in local colleges. Much more can and should be done to attract and train high school and college students. Although many election officials said they would like to have younger workers, or that younger workers would be more comfortable with the machines or would better assimilate the training information, no county has a program specifically tailored to attract younger (18-40) poll workers.

Again, the state should encourage the counties to establish programs for high school and college students and it should support such efforts.

It is not uncommon for workers to work for many years, even decades, at the same polling station. As noted above, the actual selection process happens for the most part behind closed doors. The party chairs submit names, and little effort is made by the counties to reach out to include new people, once they have the requisite number of workers. Most workers prefer to work at the same ward/district tables, declining to travel to different districts, and the County Boards acquiesce. New Jersey Appleseed, and other organizations who participate in the New Jersey Citizens Coalition to Implement the Help America Vote Act, would like to see this situation changed so that the public at large is given the opportunity to learn about and participate in this crucial part of the electoral process. One gets the sense, talking to elections officials throughout the state, that some of them see the inclusion of new workers as too much trouble, requiring too much training, too much time and effort. By contrast, we see it as a vital step in democratizing and energizing the political process, and a step that is long overdue

The state should require vigorous recruitment programs in all counties that go beyond the political party organizations. Affiliated and nonaffiliated voters should be recruited regardless of their level of involvement in any political party committee.

Training

The present requirement is that all poll workers attend a training class once every two years. The complexity of the Election Day process renders this schedule inadequate. Classes must be mandatory for every poll worker at least once a year, and this requirement should be enforced. Presently some counties allow people who are “old hands” to skip the classes. Unfortunately, such people are often the ones who need them the most. The Sequoia Advantage DRE machines, in use in some counties for as long as nine years but in others introduced within the past two years, still cause considerable confusion and anxiety. Many counties have roving technical support people on Election Day, and this is a good thing; however, hands-on training in machine operation should be required for every worker (especially those persons who have garnered their experience on lever machines) in every county.

The other significant aspect of the poll worker’s job, understanding and implementing current rules and procedures governing the conduct of the election, has become so complex that many counties do not expect their poll workers to be able to do so. One election official expressed the concerns of many when he said: “That is the weak link in the whole chain -- the Board workers. It is too confusing for them. There is too much stuff to cram into one two-hour

session, and it is too complicated for them to remember.” This is a caring and knowledgeable man who does the training classes himself. He is not scolding or blaming the workers, but rather recognizing that they need more help than he can give them. Other officials simply urge the workers to call the Board of Election office if, for example, the voter’s name is not in the book at the first table he or she approaches. Some officials do not even try to teach the poll worker how to look up the voter’s polling place, or to remember when to give a provisional ballot or what identifying documents they should request in one or another circumstance. One official tells the workers to give a provisional ballot when any problem arises—“then we can sort it out later.”

Several counties have developed films or Power Point presentations for use in their training classes and have found them helpful since they present material in a way that is more easily remembered than simply asking someone to read a manual. Some put such tools on the web for workers to consult at home. In truth, training programs vary widely across the state, but no election official was without doubts and reservations as to their efficacy. All agreed one way or another with the man quoted above who said there was now just too much for most of his workers to learn and remember. Although some counties test workers’ knowledge of voting machine operation, no county gives a test on the rules to determine whether to certify someone as ready to serve as a poll worker.

The state needs to help counties design and implement much more effective training programs than now exist. Training should be measured by proven outcome, competence in the basics, rather than simply by attendance at a “class,” and a test should be given to assess the basics before someone is certified to serve as a poll worker.

Training Manuals

The state Division of Elections recently published a well-organized 38-page manual and placed it on its web site. This manual has been endorsed and praised by many election officials with whom we spoke; we agree that the manual is comprehensive and clear and provides proper guidance to all counties. The counties must distribute this manual to their workers, but should supplement it with an additional tool that would provide quick and easy access to the essentials of the poll worker’s job as well as answers to some of the most common problems a worker confronts on Election Day. The worker could refer to this smaller guide on the spot, while the voter is present. Such a document would tell the worker what to do in such situations as the following: how to look up a voter’s correct polling place when his name is not in the book; who can assist a voter in the booth; when to give a provisional ballot and how to give the voter accurate directions about how to fill it out; the grounds for a challenge; what to do if the machine breaks down. It is unrealistic to expect every poll worker to memorize and have at his or her finger tips the answer to every question. All workers can and should, however, be expected to master the basics.

The state should develop a smaller guide than the state manual to be used statewide, similar to the current “flip chart,” that would provide answers to some of the most common problems confronted by poll workers.

Master Poll Workers

Several counties have introduced “master poll workers” to supplement and support the activities of the regular workers. Typically, the master workers are given more pay and more training. They often travel among several polling places reporting problems and troubleshooting. Counties that use master workers in this way have been pleased with the results. Master poll workers should also be very familiar with the machines, have some technical background and/or be in contact with a machine technician.

We recommend that all counties be encouraged to develop a cadre of “master poll workers.” These people are the ones who should know the contents of the 38-page manual, and should be available to all polling places on Election Day.

We might look at the goals of training in a somewhat new way. First, there are the rank and file poll workers who need to be given a thorough understanding of both the machines and the election procedures once a year. To refresh their memories on Election Day, they should have a quick-reference guide with them at the polling station. Second, one person at each polling place should be experienced and acknowledged as the person who knows how to handle the range of problems that frequently arise. Ideally, there should be a master poll worker at each table (as there is currently in Hunterdon County). Third, where there are not enough master poll workers to staff each table, a group of such people should circulate among the districts and should be on call for each polling place as needed. Under this scheme, training classes can be better designed to meet the needs of a specific audience, either an audience of new, returning, or master poll workers.

Language

Judging from what election officials told us, they are able to locate and hire bilingual poll workers where they are legally required. At this time, the counties assert that their needs are entirely for Spanish/English workers and there appears to be an adequate supply. The one exception is Bergen County, where we were told that they need bilingual Korean-speaking workers in Fort Lee. We must assume, given the presence in New Jersey of large Asian populations in a number of parts of the state, that Asian language speakers are needed by some voters in several districts where they are currently not provided. As of now, the law does not require that their needs be met, although the state has authorized that registration forms be printed in Mandarin Chinese, Korean and Gujarati. In order for the state election law to reflect voters’ language needs, we recommend the following:

State election law should be amended to require that Asian language voters receive the same type of assistance as Spanish speaking voters.

CONCLUSION

In order to undertake more energetic public education and recruitment, and to be able to implement the enhanced training programs that we have suggested above, the counties will need to commit additional resources to the administration of their elections. That is something that some counties are able to do, while others are not. Furthermore, in these budgetary times, with many worthy causes and institutions making demands on the state treasury, the case must be made that the state (with or without federal HAVA money) must assist the counties in improving their recruitment and training programs, and ensure that there is more equity across county borders. In general, county governments also need to assign a higher value to the basics of the democratic electoral process than they have hitherto. It is clear from the problems that we are trying to address, and from what county officials have told us concern them most, that the weak link in the election process can be strengthened by additional state attention to these matters, the provision of uniform guidance and standards to the counties, and the allocation of adequate resources to support proper recruitment and training.