

From Disaster to a Successful Election

A White Paper



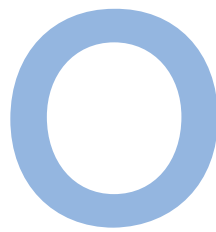
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Fire destroys Harris County's Election Technology Center building,
voting equipment, and election supplies





f all the duties the secretaries of state carry out, election oversight is possibly the most important – and certainly the most high-profile. What happens when a disaster threatens to disrupt an election? Many resources exist to help states guide their election officials in election contingency planning. However, nothing brings the need for disaster planning into focus like an actual catastrophe.

Harris County, home to Houston, Texas, is the third-largest election jurisdiction in the nation. With less than 60 days before the start of the November 2, 2010 General and Gubernatorial Election, the county experienced a three-alarm fire at its Election Technology Center. The “ETC,” as it was known, housed over 10,000 pieces of voting equipment, as well as all of the county’s election supplies. The building and all of its contents were destroyed.

How did Harris County rise from the ashes of the fire that befell them on August 27th to deliver a successful election on November 2nd? According to longtime Harris County Clerk and Chief Election Officer, Beverly Kaufman, “All of the positive elements that were in place to make it happen came together.”

Before the sun set on “fire day,” a cohesive team – the county’s risk management department, facilities group, IT department,



commissioners, and others – were already working to overcome the hurdles that now stood in the way of a business-as-usual election. Central to this effort was Administrator of Elections, John German. One of the first calls German made was to his election equipment vendor. Within hours of receiving the call, the vendor and election officials sat down and brainstormed for several hours. Together, they outlined the parameters that would drive equipment goals for Early Voting and Election Day:

- The election had to meet all federal and state legal requirements.
- Electronic voting machines would be used for in-person Early Voting, as usual.
- All of the customary polling places would be open for Early Voting and on Election Day.
- Equipment would be allocated to the 37 Early Voting locations in the quantities originally planned.
- On Election Day, at least one set of voting equipment would be deployed at each of the 736 polling locations to ensure compliance with HAVA requirements for voters with disabilities, and more would be deployed if possible in the short time remaining before Election Day.

Additionally, voting equipment had to be distributed equitably across all polling locations for both election phases (Early and Election Day voting) to provide all Harris County voters equal access to a fair voting experience. While paper ballots would augment the electronic equipment at the polls, voters would be urged to use the method most familiar to them.

By Monday, the county, with the help of a newly-formed disaster recovery team, had a plan to present at the emergency Commissioners' Court meeting called by the County Judge. The Commissioners' Court immediately took decisive action and approved the plan and budget to purchase the requested equipment.

Equipped for Success

Harris County accounts for 20 percent of the total vote in Texas. Helping the county have a successful election became a community project. Fourteen counties sent several thousand pieces of equipment on loan. For example, Bexar County, Texas provided close to 800 ballot boxes and 2,300 polling booths.

Despite the equipment coming in from other jurisdictions, Harris County would need several thousand more electronic voting machines under two strict and fast-approaching deadlines – Early Voting and Election Day. Equipment that normally takes five months of production would need to be produced in five weeks.

Every piece of election equipment, whether loaned or newly manufactured, had to go through acceptance testing to ensure that it was working properly and had the correct firmware installed. Harris County conducted the crucial tests in their temporary home for equipment distribution, Reliant Arena (also home to the NFL's Houston Texans). Once the equipment had passed acceptance tests and Harris County had conducted the state-required Logic and Accuracy Testing for every ballot style in the General Election, equipment was packaged and ready to be securely shipped to the appropriate polling sites.

A Successful Election

A smooth and virtually flawless election was a testament to Harris County successfully fulfilling its "responsibility of ensuring each citizen the opportunity to exercise their right to vote," as County Clerk Beverly Kaufman describes her charter as Chief Election Officer. Voter turnout was high for this important General and Gubernatorial Election; a total of 798,995 voters cast their ballots in Harris County. While paper ballots were available at each Election Day polling place as a backup, nearly 99 percent of voters chose to use the familiar electronic voting method they trusted.

Efforts to source parts and gear up for manufacturing thousands of pieces of voting equipment.



Best Practices and Lessons Learned

Looking at what worked for Harris County – and what the county learned – might inform other jurisdictions' disaster planning efforts.

Have a communication plan. The need to communicate effectively in an election-related emergency is twofold. You need to know what resources are available to you and have their contact information at your fingertips. You also need to assure not only the voters but also the parties and candidates – that their interests are being protected. Enlist the media as your partner in getting the word out to stakeholders. If you do not tell your story, someone else will.

Document your procedures. Thoroughly document your polling operations. John German had a standard, documented way of putting an election together. When disaster struck, he was able to quickly assess his equipment needs for the upcoming election.

Back up your data. Back up your data daily, and store a copy in another location. Even though the Harris County Elections Department lost all of its servers in the fire, the department did not lose a single bit of data. Everything – procedures manuals, forms, records – was stored off-site in electronic format.

Believe in your staff. Surround yourself with competent, committed people. Train and equip them to do their jobs; then trust them to do the right thing. Though starting from zero on voting equipment gave the logistics of running this election a new twist, the Harris County election staff was able to move forward with the management team's full support and confidence.

Talk with your vendor. Have a conversation with your equipment vendor before an emergency occurs. It is important to understand whether your vendor can quickly replace the system you use today – not a newer version of the system that might present additional expense and a steep learning curve to your jurisdiction.

Conclusion

On Election Day, all eyes are on you as an election professional. If you have taken action to mitigate known risk factors, it is likely your Election Day will shine. If disaster strikes, you can reflect on Beverly Kaufman's words: "You just need to identify what your key resources are and then bring them together at the table. You don't need to ever be afraid to ask for help. The more humble you are, the better. Don't panic! Keep a cool head. Keep expressing your thanks and heaping on the praise."

Harris County Timeline

- August 27, 2010** — Fire destroys Harris County's Election Technology Center building
- August 30, 2010** — Commissioners' Court approves plan for conducting November's General Election
- August 31, 2010** — Replacement voting equipment manufacturing begins
- September 20, 2010** — Harris County receives initial shipment of borrowed equipment
- October 4, 2010** — Harris County receives first batch of newly manufactured replacement equipment
- October 18, 2010** — Early voting begins
- October 25, 2010** — Harris County receives final batch of newly manufactured replacement equipment
- October 29, 2010** — Early voting ends
- November 2, 2010** — Harris County holds successful mid-term General and Gubernatorial Election



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