

The knowledge deficit: How elections officials can improve information sharing after team departures

Election administration is a knowledge-intensive profession losing institutional expertise faster than it can be replaced. A 2023 EVIC Survey of Local Election Officials found that 40% of respondents said they planned to retire before the 2026 election¹, with turnover steadily rising for two decades.²

The consequences aren't just operational.

Public confidence, consistent voter communication, and the officials' ability to respond authoritatively when their processes are questioned are all impacted by high turnover rates amongst election officials. Fewer chief local election officials have been in their role for six or more years — dropping from 60% in 2006 to 47% in 2024³ — meaning even decision-makers lack the institutional knowledge of their peers of decades past.

Compounding the problem: The scope of election officials' responsibilities have broadened to include cybersecurity, legal interpretation, public communications, logistics, and HR. The high turnover rates two decades in the making has grown from a structural trend to an existential challenge facing the bedrock of America's democracy — free and fair elections powered by election officials across the country.

Broadly speaking, turnover risks loss of three kinds of knowledge.

Procedural knowledge is documented information. It's theoretically transferable, but that assumes flawless knowledge management. In reality, procedural knowledge is known, but it's siloed in inboxes, buried in static documents in shared drives with inadequate permissions, or lives in the head of departing election officials, never formally memorialized.

Contextual knowledge is the judgement layer of know-how *about* procedural knowledge. Why a rule works the way it does in a given jurisdiction, how to navigate a county's unique quirks, or what to do when a thousand things need to do right for an election to be well-administered are not usually captured in formal documentation. Contextual knowledge is what takes procedural knowledge from policy to practice. It, too, is lost when experienced election officials depart their offices.

¹ [Election Official Turnover Rates from 2000-2024](#)

² [Turnover among election officials reaches new high, report finds](#)

³ [Turnover among election officials reaches new high, report finds](#)

Tying procedural and contextual knowledge together is **relational knowledge**. Like contextual knowledge, relational knowledge isn't strictly codified anywhere and it can't be distributed with a training module. But unlike context — which is about how procedures work — relational knowledge is all about people.

Every election official has friends and colleagues they can call with questions. They have networks of their peers and relationships with people across agencies across jurisdictions. Experienced election officials have also built human relationships with members of their community, lending credence to the entire operation. When someone leaves, those relationships are lost. Relationships between public servants power state and local government, and elections are no exception.

The cumulative impact of knowledge loss as a result of high turnover — turnover that's only slated to accelerate — is the loss of knowledge about documented processes, how policy translates into practice, and which people have the right information. The total impact ripples across the democratic process.

Fragmented guidance means counties within the same state may implement procedures differently. A **lack of operational consistency** can create perceived disparities in voter experience and the overall fairness and integrity of the election process. New election officials, without the peers, contextual knowledge, and even sometimes procedural documentation, often struggle to **communicate effectively** to constituents. They have the communications infrastructure, but not the institutional voice behind it because the ability to clearly, credibly explain processes to voters requires time and experience.

Voters targeted by **misinformation** is a problem that shows no sign of abating. The most effective counter is a trusted, authoritative local official who knows their jurisdiction cold and has earned community credibility — and high turnover weakens that counter. In short, high turnover can negatively impact **public trust** in the elections process.

These are all problems in and of themselves, and they fundamentally represent blockers for election officials' ability to do their jobs. But they also compound because each cycle that begins with fewer experienced officials is a cycle where these vulnerabilities are more pronounced.

The cumulative knowledge deficit doesn't reset — it accumulates.

Election officials, and Secretaries of State like those part of NASS, are aware of the problem. And while there is no one-size-fits-all approach (much like state government itself), there are best practices emerging across the country to stave off the knowledge deficit problem.

First and foremost is approaching knowledge transfer as a pre-departure obligation, going further than simply memorializing documents and spreadsheets and SOPs.

Offboarding must be highly structured and informationally dense. Codifying institutional context — how an experienced election official approached the implementation of a given policy for elections past and *why* they approached it that way — must be part of the pre-departure process. Similarly, election officials should map their network: Who has been helpful for which issues should be easily intelligible and accessible for remaining staff. This helps ensure **relational knowledge** is not lost.

Treat **peer learning as critical elections infrastructure**. Relational knowledge shouldn't only be maintained from previous regimes — it should be built upon by current election officials so the next cohort has deeper, richer networks of experienced peers from which to draw on. This matters: Election officials will trust, rightly, other election officials who've been in their shoes. This is doubly true for newer leaders who do not have the comparative experience relative to peers. This does not mean only going to conferences or joining webinars, but instead, investing in the technology and the processes that will not only enable but empower election officials from within and across jurisdictions to work with one another. Ongoing cross-jurisdictional networks are a way for knowledge to spread, a direct counter to the knowledge deficit born of high turnover.

Similarly, **shared, searchable, updatable systems** are mission-critical. Too much information is siloed in email, information that cannot survive personnel changes. It's not just about the information existing — it's about making sure it exists, can be found, understood by new staff, and updated as election administration in a locality evolves.

For NASS members, the mountain to climb is clear: If 40% of election officials retire before the 2026 election, how will you ensure elections are administered with the quality you expect?

Secretaries of States and Commonwealths need not spend an exorbitant amount of money or overhaul policies at the state level to safeguard their election processes from high turnover. We see three concrete steps:

1. **Name the knowledge deficit explicitly:** Naming the problem forces acknowledgement. Treat the knowledge deficit problem with the same gravity you would a cybersecurity weakness.
2. **Establish peer infrastructure:** Build survivable methodologies for your election officials to work with peers across the country. Ensure any implemented policy or technology is certain to outlast the individual tenure of any single election official.
3. **Set knowledge transfer standards:** States have the opportunity to define what best practices for knowledge transfer looks like for localities. By setting standards, you make it easier for cities and counties to get to work solving this problem sooner rather than later.

The compounding knowledge deficit is a solvable problem. The expertise is available. NASS is proof. Build systems that preserve and transmit knowledge at scale, so that every new official — regardless of jurisdiction size or resources — isn't starting from zero.

State leaders must recognize the problem as structural, not situational — and to act before the next cycle makes it harder, because they are the only actors positioned to make the needed changes to safeguard our elections.

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