

An Exercise in Consistency: Election Tabletop Exercises (TTXs)

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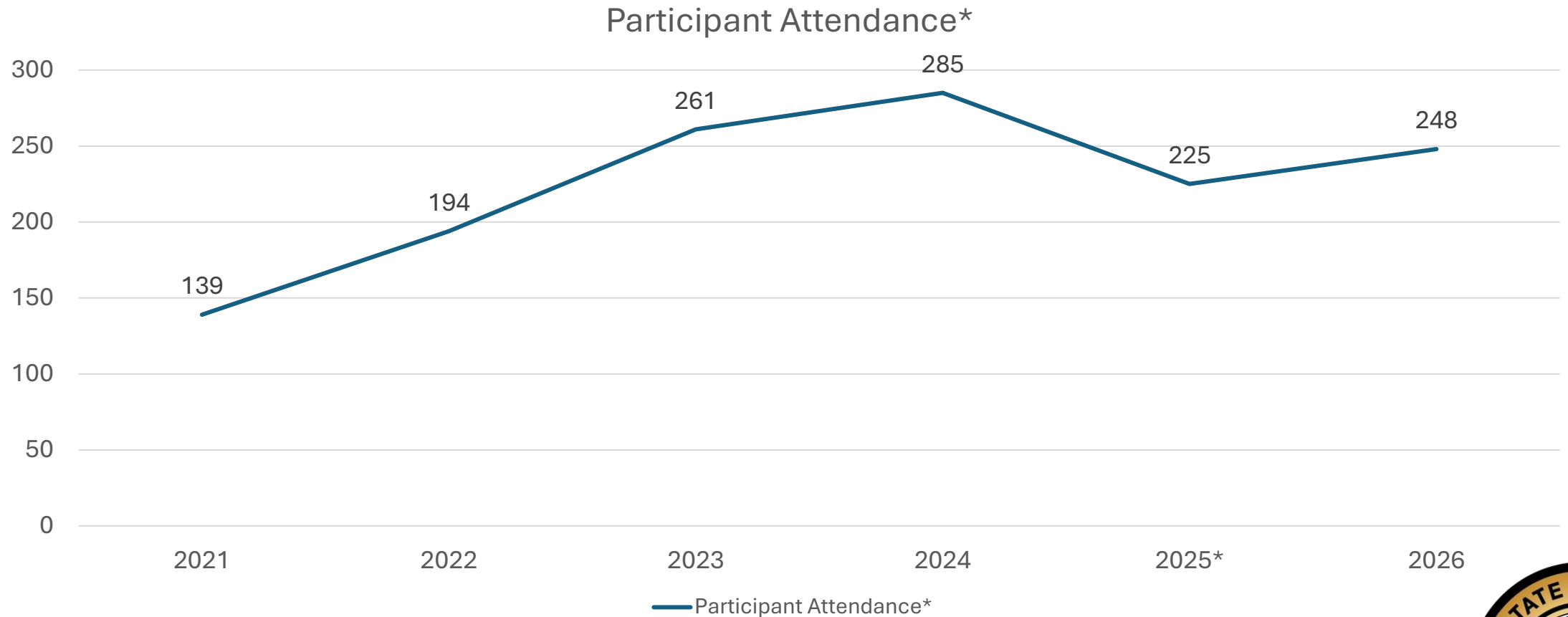


Election TTXs – A Short History

- 2018 – Belfer Center
 - Cool, new, not very replicable for states
- 2019 – 2024 – CISA discussion-based TTXs
 - Free, brought needed TTX/Incident response expertise, provided a foundation
- 2025 – ??? – Partnership interactive/gamified TTXs
 - Elections expertise, revitalization/fresh energy, not free

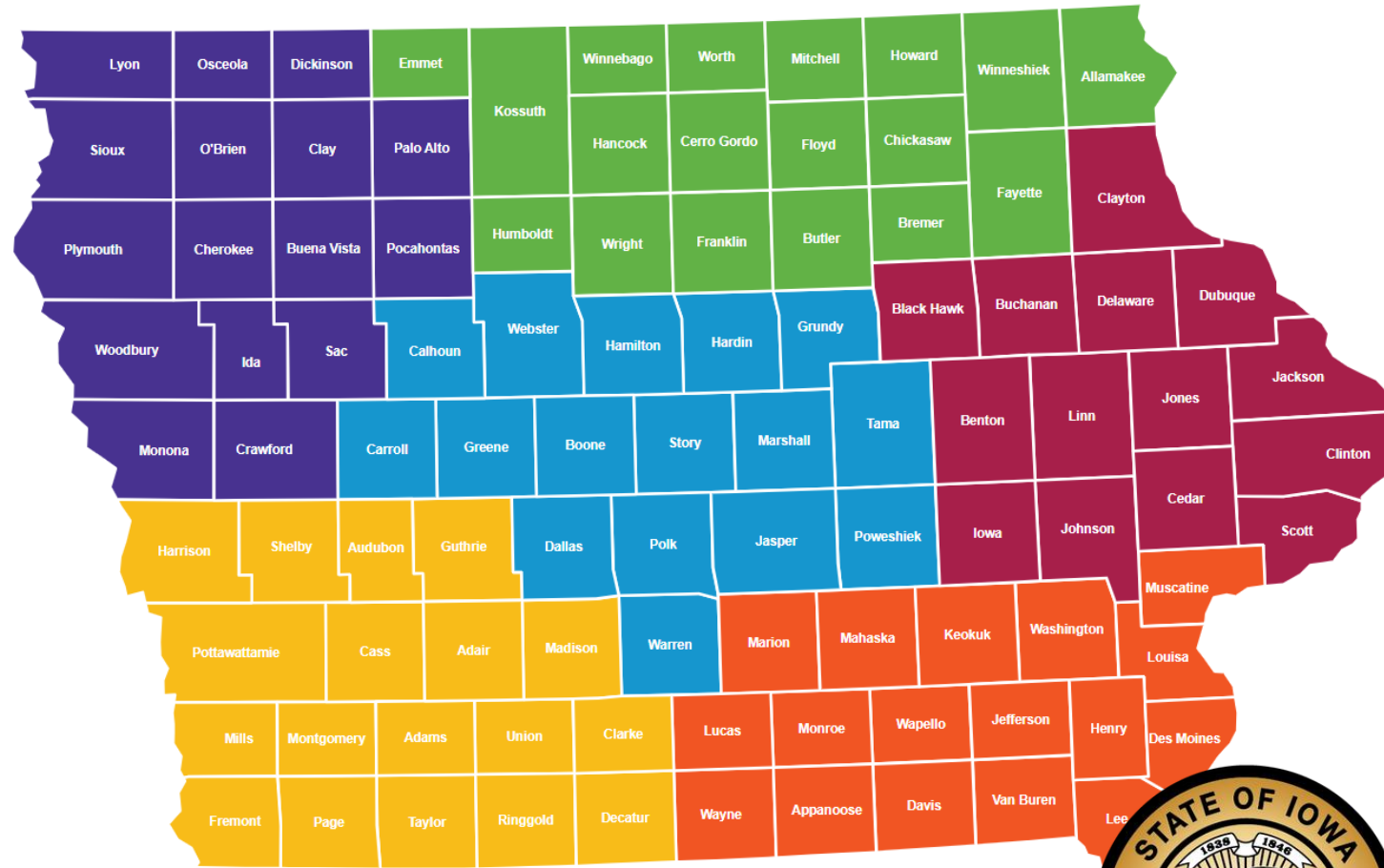


Iowa TTX Participation Rates



Executive Decisions: Improved Results

- Moved to district-based TTXs
 - Prioritizing in-person attendance
- SOS directly invites county security partners
 - IT
 - Emergency Managers
 - Law Enforcement (Sheriffs)
- Directly tested new IRP template
 - Answers required use of the new template
- Shifted to an Election Security Group



Old vs New

MODULE ONE: RESPONSE TO SUSPICIOUS PACKAGE

Scenario

November 5, 2024 @ 0830

Election Day has arrived, and the courthouse has had a steady stream of the public doing business. One of the county workers notices an unusual backpack that has been sitting in the corner for a while. The employee calls the security office, who then reports the incident to law enforcement.

Rumors about an on-site explosive device are quick to spread throughout the facility. The arrival of local responders to the scene and immediate evacuation of the building attracts the attention of news outlets as well as social media platforms. Law enforcement works to secure the site.

Discussion Questions

1. Does your organization (pre-plan?) have an existing Emergency Operations Plan (EOP)/IRP that is adaptable to evolving threats and evacuation procedures?
2. How do you alert staff and public to an incident?

November 5, 2024 @ 0915

The bomb unit arrives, determines that the suspicious package is a viable IED and work to neutralize it. Because of this, there will not be access to the building for several hours.

Time	Command Center	Auditor's Office	Lincoln Elementary School	Community Center/Senior Citizen	Chamber of Commerce	Flowerly Funeral Home
6:00	Power out, phones/internet down. Limited lighting. Assemble command structure and identify incident commander.	Office ransacked overnight — items missing. Power out. Phones and computers down. Forced to use cell phones only.	Massive sewer backup — standing water throughout building. Equipment surrounded by water. Power appears on but unsafe to use. Auditor unreachable.	Break-in overnight. All voting equipment and ballots stolen. Auditor's office phone not working. Location cannot open without replacement supplies.	Roof collapsed in main voting area. Snow and ice cover the space. Equipment buried under rubble. Power out. Auditor unreachable.	Cannot gain entry to building. Facility contact goes to voicemail. Power appears out. Auditor's office phone unreachable. Power outage - Communications -
6:00 - 6:10 a.m. MUST Dos	Musts: - Open bag, review supplies, and identify what can be used to help auditor's office and polling locations. Emergency Manager informed: backup power failed at county adult detention center.	Musts: - Open bag, review supplies, and identify what can be used to help polling locations.	Musts: - Open bag, review supplies, and identify what is needed to open the locations on time.	Musts: - Open bag, review supplies, and identify what is needed to open the locations on time.	Musts: - Open bag, review supplies, and identify what is needed to open the locations on time.	Musts: - Open bag, review supplies, and identify what is needed to open the locations on time.
6:05	County network down — IT investigating cause. County Auditor concerned about legal exposure if polls don't open (lawsuits, court extensions). PIO begins comms outreach. Law enforcement spots suspicious package polling	Reporter asks if poll workers are having setup issues. Team must decide how to respond. Realizing poll workers will soon call for help — backup communications plan needed urgently.	Voting equipment confirmed intact — moved out of flooded area. Team identifies alternative setup solutions and needs auditor approval.	Early voters show up and discover the problem. Some begin contacting news media.	Collapsed area still not entered — safety concern. One poll worker is related to the county Emergency Manager, a potential resource.	Reporter van arrives in parking lot. Asks why poll workers can't access the building and whether it will open on time.
6:10 - 6:20 a.m. MUST Dos	Musts: -Begin providing walkie talkies to auditor's office and polling locations. -IT - Communicate about the network being down and identify backup solutions. -Auditor - connect with auditor's office to identify needs. Decision should be made to contact county attorney for awareness. - Law enforcement - take action to investigate	Musts: -Communicate with polling locations about what is needed. -Provide supplies as requested. -Issue instructions to polling locations. -Set tone that polling locations should remain at their current locations due to weather issues and to identify other solutions (Lincoln and Washington)	Musts: Urge poll workers to request a temporary shelter.	Musts: -Urge poll workers to request supplies. -Ask to identify what they tell the voters showing up.	Musts: -Urge poll workers to request supplies and to seek help (this location has ballots) -Decide whether to contact the emergency manager or not.	Musts: Poll workers must respond to the request from the media. What is the response?
6:20	IT receives tip that auditor's website may be compromised. Secondary Roads Manager reports snowplow driver spotted a person in an orange jumpsuit walking along road	Elections Specialist discovers website defaced — candidate photo with "Vote For Me" on homepage. Full status review of all polling locations conducted.	Frustrated poll worker announces plan to leave temporarily for dry shoes and clothing. Others want to follow. Staffing levels at risk.	News van now in the parking lot. One team member wants to go out and give an on-camera interview.	Alternative room discovered inside the building — not impacted by roof collapse. Team begins planning to relocate polling operation.	Team gains access to building but realizes it is far too dark to operate — power still out. Alternative lighting now urgently needed.
6:20 - 6:30 a.m.	Musts: -Continue to communicate with auditor's office to identify needs at polling locations. Provide supplies as needed. -All - Identify status of polling locations by contacting auditor's office -IT - Determine what the	Musts: -Communicate with polling locations about what is needed. -Report website issue -All - Identify status of polling locations by contacting auditor's office -Provide supplies as requested.	Musts: -Poll workers must receive temporary shelter. -Poll workers must identify solution for poll workers leaving.	Musts: -Poll workers must request supplies needed. -They must record what actions was taken with media.	Musts: -Poll workers must request supplies needed. -Begin relocation to other room in building. -Identify if signage or other supplies may be needed.	Musts: -Request alternate lighting supplies.



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Goal – Shifting Perspective

Two sides to every coin

It was too chaotic... It was unrealistic...

vs

It was all the chaos ... which was great because that is more [like] real life

Not being in my actual role did not allow me to learn as much as I could have

vs

...had me thinking like a PEO and made me think of new ways and things that need to be included in training

It was just the smaller counties listening to how the bigger counties had already planned for those situations

vs

Collaboration ... learning how things operate at larger counties as well as smaller counties



Goals...

Partner Buy-in and Education

I was very happy our EMA director came, and he was very surprised to see what goes into election day and he is very excited to fully work with us in the future.

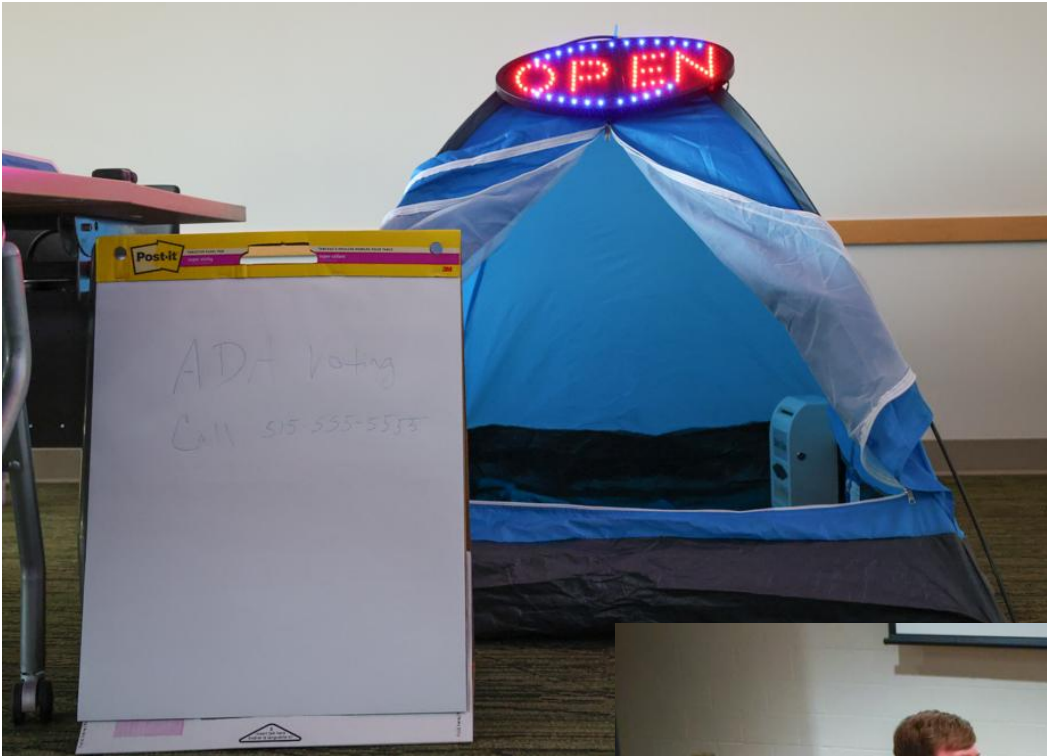
Engagement

Shifting away from the lecture-style format used in previous TTXs and moving toward a model with real interaction and hands-on tasks was a smart change. It created stronger engagement, better problem-solving, and a more realistic sense of how we operate as a team.

Realism and Practicality

It wasn't theoretical anymore. Each decision had real consequences, and every step required deliberate action, not just discussion.





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Ultimate Goal – Uninterrupted Voting

Good afternoon–We’ve received notification of a power outage at one of our Vote Centers for today’s runoff election. Staff are currently checking in voters using laptop battery power, collecting signature on paper DOEs, and utilizing FVTs with battery backup along with paper ballots. There has been no interruption to voters’ ability to cast their ballots.

Secondary Roads is on the way to the location with a generator.

Competence, Confidence, and.....
Less Work For Me

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