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SAFE AND EFFICIENT ELECTION ADMINISTRATION DURING COVID-19

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As township clerks prepare for the August primary and November general elections, they are facing an unprecedented set of challenges: record absentee ballot requests, new health and safety precautions for in-person voting, and a pressing need to recruit new election inspectors. To address these challenges, the research team compiled best practices from secondary research and interviews with clerks and elections experts to provide guidance on both absentee ballot management and in-person voting.

Below are our recommendations for the August and November 2020 elections:

- 1.** Evaluate electronic equipment efficiency in August to prepare for November
- 2.** Purchase protective equipment for poll workers and voters
- 3.** Provide masks and accommodations to address mask mandate
- 4.** Communicate with voters to reduce distrust in vote-by-mail process
- 5.** Use creative poll worker recruitment techniques and move training online
- 6.** Track same-day registrations to ensure adequate staffing for November
- 7.** Follow pending legislation and advocate for state-level changes

RESEARCH METHODS

We utilized recommendations from policy leaders at both the state and national levels, including the National Conference of State Legislatures, Brennan Center for Justice, Esri, and International Foundation for Electoral Systems, as well as news articles discussing election successes and challenges in other states. The team also consulted and gathered recommendations from a state-level election official, a Michigan elections expert, and research centers at University of Michigan.

In addition to secondary research, the research team completed 11 interviews with township clerks. The clerks interviewed represented the Upper and Lower Peninsulas, as well as rural and suburban townships. The population of the townships represented in the interview data range from roughly 2,700 to 100,000, with the number of voting precincts per township ranging from one to 40.

CHALLENGES FACING TOWNSHIP CLERKS

Michigan county and township clerks have found it challenging to meet the needs of voters amid COVID-19 pandemic. To encourage absentee voting, Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson announced that absentee ballot applications would be mailed to all 7.7 million registered voters. This has initiated a large increase in voters using the vote-by-mail system, in 2016, 35 days before the primary election about 284,000 absentee ballots were issued to voters, compared to the 1 million absentee ballots that were issued before the 35 day mark in 2020.¹ In our own interviews, clerks reported between double and triple the rate of absentee ballot requests compared to the 2016 election. At the same time, clerks must continue to offer in-person polling locations that provide safeguards to prevent transmission of COVID-19 on Election Day.

Processing the swell in absentee ballot applications has escalated clerks' workload and created concerns about their ability to rapidly process absentee ballots on Election Day. An absentee ballot must be sealed in an envelope with an address sticker before being submitted, and then later unsealed and tabulated on Election Day.²

With an influx of absentee ballots,³ clerks need to purchase extra equipment and prepare their Absentee Voter Counting Boards (AVCBs) or precincts for processing a higher volume of ballots on Election Day. In our interviews we found that clerks are expecting about 50-60% of their overall voter turnout will be absentee voters.

Clerks are rapidly adapting polling locations to changing safety guidelines to minimize the potential spread of COVID-19. They are universally committed to ensuring that their election inspectors and voters feel comfortable with the precautions in place and are as safe as possible on Election Day. Some clerks described financial and space constraints that have added to the challenge of spacing booths, tables, and designated spots in line six feet apart. Across jurisdictions, recruitment of election inspectors—many of whom are elderly in a typical election year—and additional AVCB inspectors is top of mind.

FUNDING BACKGROUND

Through the CARES Act, which provides federal grant money for COVID-19 relief, Michigan has a total of \$11.2M to spend on absentee voting encouragement and supplies for safe in-person elections.⁴ The state allocated clerks a prorated allocation up to a certain dollar amount (based on the number of voters in each township) to request supplies and equipment for the August Primary Election.

The clerks we initially interviewed were worried about the lack of local funds for this emergency. Most funding for elections comes from the localities, only some come in grants from the state or the federal levels. As interviews progressed, clerks were more familiar with the CARES funding option and expressed more confidence in their ability to cover their costs. We talked to clerks who were unsure if they were going to get enough grant money to fund personal protective equipment (PPE), extra poll workers, and other safety precautions needed for Election Day. In a larger township, a clerk was working closely with their emergency manager using the funding from that office to help with the necessary equipment for Election Day. While in smaller townships, a clerk told us they were using overtime hours to fund the PPE they were buying for their precincts, and others said they were cutting their own hours to have enough time saved for the entirety of Election Day. While this is not advisable, these are some of the creative examples clerks were using to find room in their budget.

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RECOMMENDATION #1: EVALUATE ELECTRONIC EQUIPMENT EFFICIENCY TO PREPARE FOR NOVEMBER

Most clerks expressed confidence that they have adequate tabulators and high-speed envelope openers to process additional absentee ballots in August, though some jurisdictions have purchased additional equipment in preparation. In our interviews, we found that relatively large and wealthy townships experience no financial difficulty purchasing extra equipment, but smaller townships are taking a wait-and-see approach to evaluate the adequacy of their equipment.

For example, one clerk from a large township with 40 precincts told us that they have four high-speed tabulators, four counting boards, and adjudication software that allow the scanner to run continuously and sort ballots with issues. The clerk mentioned that they received a 50% grant for a new tabulator and planned to “dip into coffers” to pay for any additional Election Day preparatory materials. But purchasing an additional tabulator (around \$35,000) and adjudication software (around \$25,000) is not a viable option for smaller townships. A clerk from a small township told us that with only one tabulator, they anticipated that they would have difficulty processing ballots by the end of Election Day and are prepared to provide election results later than in prior years.

The August primary election provides a lower-volume test run for townships to evaluate the adequacy of their election equipment. Townships that realize they need extra equipment for the larger November election will have three months to purchase machines and identify funding options to cover the added cost.

RECOMMENDATION #2: PURCHASE PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT FOR POLL WORKERS AND VOTERS

For in-person voting, in general, most clerks plan to get PPE, such as plexiglass shields, hand sanitizer, individual pens, alcohol wipes, face shields or surgical masks, baggies for driver's licenses, and additional ballot sleeves. Not all clerks have additional face shields or gloves to give to the public, but all clerks told us that they have face shields or surgical masks, gloves, and hand sanitizers for poll workers.

We also heard concerns about social distancing. According to CDC guidelines, voters need to "leave space between themselves and others" and follow the "six feet distancing" rule. But one clerk voiced her concerns about managing long lines and instructing voters to obey the social distancing rules on Election Day.

Physical barriers such as plexiglass shields and floor decals can be used to help poll workers avoid physical contact with voters. Below are specific recommendations to safely equip election inspectors and voters:

- For townships that can afford it, purchase plexiglass in front of the ID presentation area and use small baggies to hold voters' driver licenses sanitarly.
- For townships that cannot afford expensive physical barriers, purchase shower curtains to provide an extra layer of protection.
- Designate points of entry and exit to create a one-way voter flow and minimize contact between voters.
- Put up signs and lay out floor decals marking the correct distance for voters to wait and increase distance between voting booths.

We also found out that not all townships can provide individual pens for all voters. For those townships that cannot afford extra pens, some clerks told us that they plan to have voters drop pens in a basket to spray with Lysol and then redistribute or encourage voters to bring their own pens.

Additionally, some township clerks are moving polling locations to larger spaces, such as gyms or event halls to allow safe spacing. If polling locations are relocated, clerks should ensure they adequately communicate the change to voters in a timely manner. Relocating polling sites can depress voter turnout,⁵ so clerks should prioritize changes to existing polling locations before considering moving them elsewhere.

Below is a summary of the equipment needed by clerks, as well as cost estimates:

In person/ AV ballots	Equipment Needs
Processing AV ballots	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tabulator (<u>\$5,000</u>) 2. High-speed scanner (<u>starting at \$5,000</u>) 3. Letter openers or high-speed automatic letter opener (<u>\$449</u>) 4. Adjudication software, if feasible (\$2500)
In-person voting	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Masks for workers (\$20-\$30/50 masks) 2. Plastic shields (\$15/10 pcs) 3. Hand sanitizer containing 60% alcohol (\$5) 4. Gloves (around \$22/100 pcs) 5. Styluses for touch screen tabulators (\$8-25/10 pcs) 6. Individual pens (\$8/60 pens) 7. Ballot sleeves (<u>\$8</u>) 8. Paper towels, tissues, and disinfecting wipes (\$10-30/200 wipes) 9. Physical barriers, such as plexiglass shields (\$100-170) or plastic shower curtains (\$3-10) 10. Exit or entry signs (\$9) 11. No-touch trash cans (\$25-40) 12. Floor decals (\$16/5-pack) or painter's tape (\$4/roll)

RECOMMENDATION #3: PROVIDE MASKS & ACCOMMODATIONS TO ADDRESS MASK MANDATE

On July 17, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer ordered people wear masks in public indoor and crowded outdoor spaces, but she stated that voters who choose not to wear a mask would not be turned away from a polling place. Gov. Whitmer said, “We want to encourage and enforce masking up, but we certainly recognize the inherent right to go in and cast your ballot.”

We found that many clerks are concerned over how the mask mandate applies to elections. Most clerks are notably concerned about handling voters who refuse to wear masks. In response, one clerk indicated that they plan to create a drive-up service to bring ballots to maskless voters' vehicles and have inspectors assist such voters outside of the polling location. Another clerk plans to physically distance one or two polling places away from the regular stations. Below are specific recommendations to safely protect election inspectors and voters if some choose not to wear a mask to the polling place:

1. **Disposable masks:** If the township can afford it have disposable masks on hand to offer any voters who come in without a mask
2. **Isolated polling station:** If the voter refuses to wear a mask, isolate or distance a specific polling booth away from the election inspectors and voters, have one election inspector retrieve their ballot and feed it through the tabulator instead of having them feed it through themselves.
3. **Drive-up:** With viable space and enough personnel, clerks can create a drive-up voting service by having a voter fill out the ballot in their car. An election inspector can then retrieve it and feed it through the tabulator inside the polling location.

RECOMMENDATION #4: COMMUNICATE WITH VOTERS TO REDUCE DISTRUST IN VOTE-BY-MAIL PROCESS

Clerks have expressed that the increase in absentee voting has some voters voicing distrust in the system. Specific concerns included confidence in mail carriers and the mail system at large, and possible fraud. In response to worries about fraud, there is no evidence that mail-in ballots increase electoral fraud given the protections built into the process.⁶ It is very difficult to engage in fraud on a widespread basis because every ballot is checked against the signatures on the envelope and the voter registration file.⁷ However, it is up to the clerk's office to communicate with voters and help them understand how ballots are processed.

“ There is **no evidence** that **mail-in ballots** increase electoral fraud given the **protections** built into the process. ”

To help with outreach and concerns about the mail system we recommend:

- Townships place a clearly labeled dropbox in front of the clerk's office as an alternative to the mail-in option
- That clerks advertise the dropbox on social media, through local news, or on their township's webpage
- Clerks mail educational materials on absentee voting to clarify questions on fraud and help voters fill out their ballots. For example, in Pennsylvania the Department of State will provide a promotional toolkit aimed at educating Pennsylvanians on the 2020 voting process. Additionally, California plans to email voters information and deadlines so that “they have election tools right in their inbox.”⁸
- Incorporating #TrustedInfo2020 into outreach campaigns. In Washington, Secretary of State Kim Wyman plans to include the #TrustedInfo2020 hashtag in all election related materials, social media posts, and graphics. West Virginia even uses the hashtag to introduce clerks on social media so that they can serve as trusted sources for election information for voters.⁹

RECOMMENDATION #5: USE CREATIVE POLL WORKER RECRUITMENT TECHNIQUES AND MOVE TRAINING ONLINE

In 2016, over half of poll workers were 61 or older, placing them at high risk should they contract COVID-19.¹⁰ As a result, many longtime poll workers are opting not to work in 2020, and township clerks must find a workforce that is able to safely work the polls in their place. Many clerks explained that, even in a normal year, recruiting poll workers is a major challenge.

A secondary challenge for some communities is the overlap between regular poll workers and individuals running for election, because candidates on the ballot and their relatives are not able to work at polling locations. For example, one clerk explained that, in a typical election year, the township's treasurer, treasurer's wife, a trustee, and the trustee's wife all serve as poll workers. However, this year, both the treasurer and trustee are up for reelection, creating a shortage of four poll workers.

To address these challenges, clerks and managers are turning to the following solutions to fill their poll worker needs:

1. Creating new promotional materials and developing an effective follow-up strategy: Some jurisdictions are creating new promotional materials, including web pages and advertisements, to explain the responsibility of being a poll worker. These communications share testimonials, remind potential poll workers of their civic duty, and emphasize the health precautions being undertaken to protect poll workers' health. Additionally, proactive follow-up has helped some clerks secure commitments from individuals to work as poll workers.¹¹

2. Recruiting students: Local high school, community college, and university students over 16 years of age are a viable pool of poll workers. Many clerks are reaching out directly to school administrators for recommendations of student workers, as well as working with administrators to provide excused absences for students who work the polls. Election officials in Hamilton County, Ohio made videos to send to civics and history teachers to show to their 17- and 18-year-old students to encourage their participation.¹²

3. Recruiting a team of poll workers for a single polling location: Washoe County, Nevada launched the "Adopt a Polling Place Program" program and sought to partner with local businesses, civic groups, nonprofits, and other local organizations to recruit a team of poll workers for a single polling location.¹³

4. Accessing state-recruited workers: The Secretary of State has created a program—[Democracy MVP](#)—to encourage individuals to sign up as poll workers (though the state cannot directly sign them up, because election inspectors are hired at the local level). Clerks are able to reach out to the program administrators to request the contact information of people who have signed up through Democracy MVP. Clerks can then directly contact those individuals to ask them to sign up as poll workers.

5. Recruiting licensed attorneys: In Ohio, Supreme Court Justice Maureen O' Connor encouraged 49,000 licensed attorneys to serve as poll workers and created a temporary rule to allow any Ohio attorneys who serve as poll workers to receive continuing education credits.¹⁴

6. **Trading poll workers:** To address the issue of candidates' inability to work the polls in their own community, some clerks have swapped poll workers with neighboring jurisdictions. For example, if Township A's treasurer and Township B's supervisor typically work as election inspectors in their own townships but are unable to this year because they are on the ballot, they could switch and work as a poll worker in each other's jurisdictions.

7. **Working with local sport teams and training stadium and team staff:** In Georgia, local officials have announced that they will use an NBA arena as an early voting site and turned the practice court and media dining room into a hub for processing absentee ballots. Townships could try something similar on a smaller scale with local athletic teams.¹⁵

8. **Socially distanced training:** To train election inspectors, clerks have opted to offer socially distanced, in-person training or online training via a video conferencing platform like Zoom. Clerks that have conducted virtual training have found the training to be effective and meet the training requirements set forth by the state.

RECOMMENDATION #6: TRACK SAME-DAY REGISTRATIONS TO ENSURE ADEQUATE STAFFING FOR NOVEMBER

In the March 2020 election—the first election in which voters could register on Election Day—approximately 13,000 people registered to vote on Election Day, with over 6,000 registering after 4:30 p.m.¹⁶ Although this created large lines with wait times of several hours in a few jurisdictions, the backups seemed to be concentrated in college towns like Ann Arbor, East Lansing, and Kalamazoo. Township clerks expressed confidence in their ability to handle same-day registrations, and the August Primary Election will provide additional data points to identify where clerks might expect to see more same-day registrations.

RECOMMENDATION #7: FOLLOW PENDING LEGISLATIVE AND ADVOCATE FOR STATE-LEVEL CHANGES

There may be opportunities to change election procedures to help clerks struggling in the current crisis. Two bills have been submitted to the State Senate to change election law around the counting and handling of absentee ballots. While these are possible avenues for advocacy, we do not anticipate they will change before the elections held in August this year.

Senate Bill 756 allows election inspectors at AVCBs to work in shifts after polls close. These election inspectors are not allowed to leave the building until all votes are tallied, and there must be no breaks during the shift transition, however this would allow the election inspectors a rest if they have an overwhelming amount of votes to tally. The clerk of the county or township that chooses to use this method of giving shifts to poll workers would have to notify the Secretary of State's office at least 40 days before the election and provide the names of the inspectors working in shifts. This measure was referred to the Senate Committee on Ways and Means on June 24, 2020.¹⁹

Senate Bill 757 allows city or township clerks with a population of at least 25,000 to open absentee voter ballot return envelopes on the day before Election Day.²⁰ Without an automatic envelope opener, cities and townships are often slowed down by this one process. This measure would help speed up the time it takes to count overwhelming numbers of ballots. The clerk would have to notify the Secretary of State 40 days in advance of going through this process, and would only be able pre-process the ballots from 10am-8pm the day before the election.²¹ This measure has been referred to the Committee on Elections as of May 27, 2020, and there has been no movement on this bill since.²²

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University of Michigan Youth Policy Lab
5201 Institute for Social Research
426 Thompson St
Ann Arbor, MI 48104

734-647-8829

 @YouthPolicyLab

youthpolicylab.umich.edu

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About the Authors

Emily Fletcher graduated in 2020 with her MBA and MPP degrees from the Ross School of Business and Ford School of Public Policy. She is interested in state and local policy, economic development, and public finance.

Lingling Peng is a recent graduate from the Ford School of Public Policy. She has a strong interest in public policy analysis, international development, programming, and data visualization.

Nora Sullivan is a second year candidate at the Ford School of Public Policy. She is interested in fiscal and electoral policy as well as policy analysis.

Youth Policy Lab Mission

The University of Michigan Youth Policy Lab helps community and government agencies make better decisions by measuring what really works. We're data experts who believe that government can and must do better for the people of Michigan. We're also parents and community members who dream of a brighter future for all of our children. At the Youth Policy Lab, we're working to make that dream a reality by strengthening programs that address some of our most pressing social challenges.

We recognize that the wellbeing of youth is intricately linked to the wellbeing of families and communities, so we engage in work that impacts all age ranges. Using rigorous evaluation design and data analysis, we're working closely with our partners to build a future where public investments are based on strong evidence, so all Michiganders have a pathway to prosperity.