



ISABEL LONGORIA

ELECTIONS ADMINISTRATOR



U.S. Election Assistance Commission Clearinghouse Awards Submission

Best Practices in Recruiting, Retaining, and Training Poll Workers

Harris County Elections Electronics Support Specialist Program

The Electronic Support Specialist Program was created to help the Harris County Elections Office find a solutions to the challenge of enhancing its technological capacity at each Election Day polling location and hiring more student election clerk recruits.

In the past, some election clerks were struggling to set up the equipment correctly on Election Day. Despite the efforts to remediate the issue, by increased training and strategically placing technicians across the county to respond to any voting location experiencing technical issues, some election clerks continued to struggle. As Harris County unrolled new technology at the polls, including adding electronic pollbooks and curbside BellCall Buzzers to the Election Day voting process, the technological challenges multiplied and the need for a person to be responsible for the set up and maintenance of electronic election equipment at each polling location became evident.

In 2009, the Texas Legislature enacted a law that allows high school students 16 years of age or older to work as election clerks with the consent of a legal guardian and school administrator. The Harris County Elections Office began promoting the Election Day poll worker opportunity among high schools in all school districts in and around Harris County with the goal of growing the bilingual election clerk corps by recruiting motivated students who spoke Chinese, Vietnamese or Spanish, as well as English, and help Presiding Precinct Election Judges comply with the Language provision of Section 203 of the 1975 Voting Rights Act. The recruitment effort was a success, with more high school student recruits each year. Unfortunately, the overall success of the program was impacted by the fact that Texas law provides Presiding Precinct Election Judges the power to hire their Election Day staff. Many Presiding Judges, who have worked with their same team for years, were reluctant to hire the students the county recruited. As a result, many of the high school student recruits who wanted the opportunity to work at the polls were not being utilized.

The Harris County Elections Office conceived the Electronics Support Specialist Program to enhance its technological capacity on Election Day by placing a student at each polling location to address voting equipment connectivity and/or technical issues. This program is also a way to involve more students in the elections process by hiring them to perform this crucial function.

Through this program, students receive specialized hands-on training to enable placement at a polling location to provide assistance with issues related to the electronic voting equipment, ensuring polls are open on time and all voters are able to cast a ballot promptly and efficiently. To ensure the success of the program, the Specialists are hired and placed directly at each Vote Center by the Harris County Elections office.



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The creation of the Electronics Support Specialist Program incorporates young people in the electoral process in a uniquely substantive manner and provides a vehicle to grow and train the next generation of election clerks. To make the program a reality and ensure its success, the following steps were taken:

DEVELOPING THE PROGRAM

The role of the Electronics Support Specialist at the poll was defined as providing the Presiding Judge assistance with setup and maintenance of the electronic voting equipment, managing the Wait Time feature, as well as supporting the Presiding Judge with other tasks. Clarifying the job function of Electronics Support Specialist facilitated the creation of a message for recruitment, curriculum for training, and internal infrastructure for placement.

RECRUITMENT

The most effective outreach for this program has proven to be to educators, parents, and civic groups.

The majority of the outreach for this program is aimed at high schools within Harris County. Each summer, a comprehensive contact list for each high school in each ISD in Harris County is created. The list contains emails for teachers, administrators, and superintendents found on each school/school district website. Beginning three months before an Election, the list is used to email each contact a letter about the program. The letter gives a quick, comprehensive explanation of the program, a call to action to recruit students, offers an opportunity to schedule a member of our Voter Outreach team to come out and speak with students, and has printable applications attached for easy distribution. Two follow up emails are sent as reminders for application deadlines.

Several incentives are provided to the students who participate in this program. On Election Day, the students get paid an hourly rate of \$17 and have the opportunity to work between 12 to 14 hours. Our office also provides the students with a letter of recommendation from Harris County Elections Administrator Isabel Longoria. Students can provide a copy of this, as well as their pay stub, to their high school attendance office and receive an excused absence and volunteer hours.

Social media is also used as a recruitment method for this program. Posts are made across all platforms and are geared toward students, parents, and bilingual students with the incentives of making some extra money, getting volunteer hours for their extracurricular activities, adding to their college applications, and serving their community.

Outreach to civic groups around the county has proved successful as well. These groups, already focused on engagement, are able to incorporate student poll worker recruitment into their messaging and reach wide audiences quickly.

TRAINING



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A two hour training class was developed specifically for our Electronics Support Specialists. This class is held at our Election Technology Center in the weeks leading up to Election Day. Once a student is assigned a polling location to work on Election Day, they are given a list of dates and times to choose from to attend training. Each election cycle, we have over 20 opportunities for students to attend a class. Classes are held on both weekends and week nights after school hours to accommodate various scheduling needs. Due to the interactive nature of this class, we limit each training to 40 students.

Taught by our Logistics Manager and other members of our election equipment team, this course provides hands-on experience setting up and breaking down eSlate machines and Judge Booth Controllers (JBC). This course also covers set up and troubleshooting for ePollBooks, Ballotcall Max, and connectivity. Students are provided a training manual with pictures and step by step instructions matching what they learned in training. They are also provided materials on being a greeter, translator, and JBC operator.

Students are paid for their attendance in this training class. It is mandatory for them to attend in order to work on Election Day, regardless of if they have attended the class before. A detailed record is kept of who attends to ensure that all students hired have been trained.

In the November 2020 election cycle, the training class was moved to an online format in order to keep students and staff safe during the ongoing pandemic. With the online format, we were able to train more students at one time. It also allowed us to record a training to send out to all students as a refresher before Election Day. Students are also now required to attend a one hour ADA training course as well.

PLACEMENT

The Electronics Support Specialist Training is mandatory for placement at an Election Day polling location. Electronics Support Specialists must attend training in each Election cycle in order to work on Election Day. A detailed record is kept of all the recruits that are hired, the training each one attended, and the polling location each one was assigned. Polling location assignments are based on the student's zip code proximity to a location.

During the 2019 November election cycle, the launch of the new Electronics Support Specialist position lead to a high volume of applicants. The interest and support of high school students, teachers, and administrators ensured the success of the recruitment of poll workers. The Harris County Elections Office received 229% more student poll worker applications than the previous year. Many of these applications were submitted by students who had worked a previous election and were looking to participate again. For the March 2020 Primary Elections, more than 3,000 applications were received, a 111% jump from 2019. The exponential growth of the program continued in the November 2020 Presidential election cycle with over 7,000 students from across Harris and neighboring counties submitting an application.

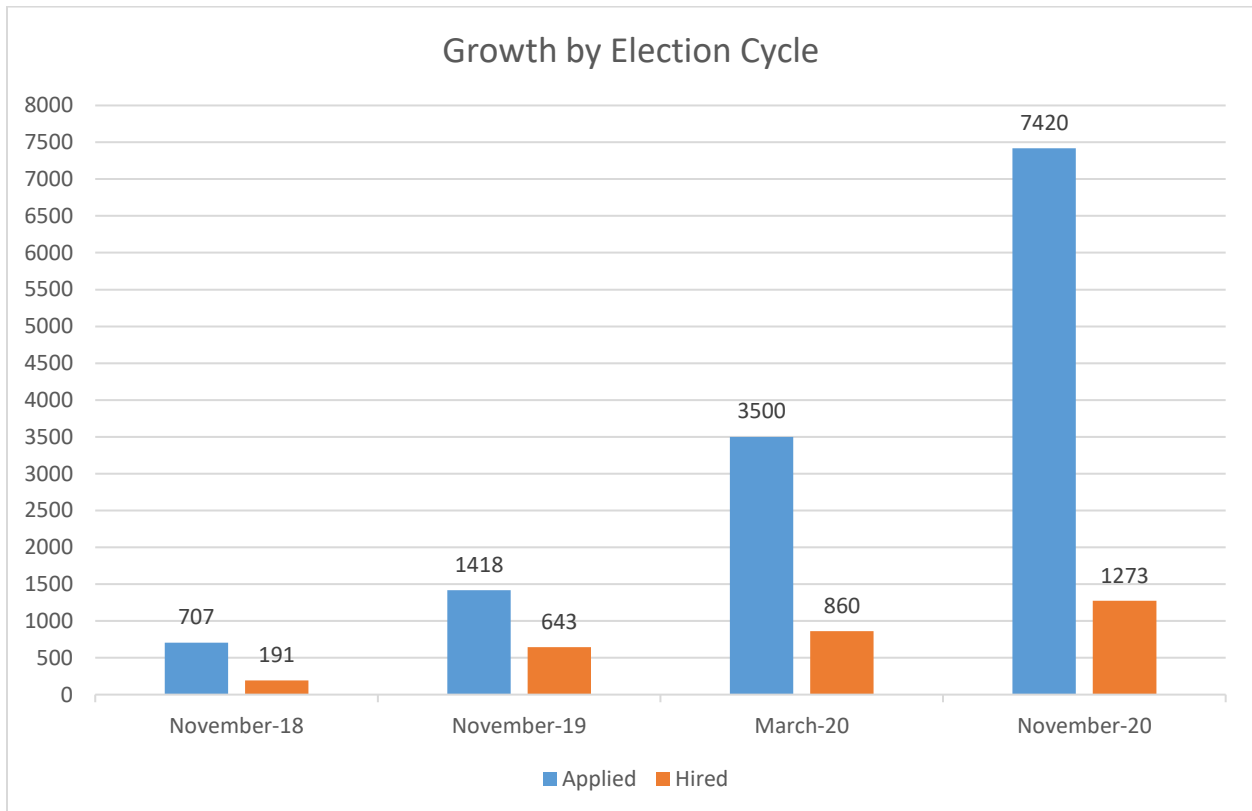


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The volume of applicants made it possible for the Harris County Elections Office to assign an Electronics Support Specialist at each polling location on Election Day. Additionally, for the first time, it allowed the Elections Office to place a student at each of our 120 Early Voting locations for all 18 days of Early Voting. Student workers were also involved in other areas of the election process on Election Day and on Election night. On Election Day, polling location that were understaffed were able to utilize the students in other areas such as greeting voters or assisting in operating the Judge Booth Control (JBC) in voter qualifying process. On Election night, student recruits working at drop off locations helped staff process and log the return of the voting equipment and materials by assisting Judges with carrying the supplies into the building from their car, checking the equipment in, and helping technicians sort, wrap and ready the equipment for shipping to the election warehouse.



Having an Electronics Support Specialist on site at each polling location resulted in technical issues being resolved swiftly. In one instance, an eSlate machine went down at a location. The student working as an Electronics Support Specialist was able to get it up and running quickly. Without that student, the location would have had to wait for a Harris County tech to come out, creating a longer wait time for some voters in line to cast their ballot.



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The reaction to the Electronics Support Specialist Program from Election Day Precinct Election Judges was overwhelming positive. Testimonials from election officials and supervisors, as well as teachers, best encapsulate the program's success. The Presiding Election Judge at precinct 139 asserted, "Our Technician at poll 0139 was amazing. Not only did she handle several issues that came up during the day, she was a dedicated worker and a pleasure to work with. She was calm, professional, and effective in all of these situations." Many Judges have requested the same student return to work with them the next election cycle. A teacher from Alief Early College High School said that she was so inspired by the students poll workers that she planned to apply to serve as an Election Day poll worker too, exclaiming, "Missing a day of school for real life experience to see our democracy in action- I couldn't write a better lesson plan!"

By creating the position of Electronics Support Specialist, and a comprehensive, training class, Harris County has incorporated more students in the elections process. Our recruitment efforts lead to a high volume of applications, resulting in students being placed at every polling location on Election Day. Student recruits also played a role in our election night supply drop off. Harris County's recruitment and smart use of the student poll workers as Electronics Support Specialists ensured a better voting experience for all the voters.



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Electronics Support Specialists News Coverage

[Not old enough to vote, but old enough to help: How teens are helping to avert an election crisis](#), Pocono Record (9/28/2020)

[Harris County's ambitious election plan calls for 11,000 poll workers; 29,000 people applied](#), Houston Chronicle (9/25/2020)

[Not old enough to vote, but old enough to help: How teens are helping to avert an election crisis](#), USA Today (9/24/2020)

[Texas needs more poll workers this year because of the pandemic. Here's how to become one.](#), The Texas Tribune (9/21/2020)

[Young people are trying to save the US election amid dire poll worker shortages](#), The Guardian (9/1/2020)

[Runoff Voter Guide: How to vote, who is on the ballot and what to know about July 14 primary runoffs in Harris County](#), ABC 13 (7/10/2020)