

I. In Focus This Week

State and county elections offices struggle to deal with economic crisis

Lay-offs, cutbacks, closings are all on the table to cope with growing deficits

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Like many in their line of work, the [Johnson County, Kan.](#) elections office staff worked tirelessly throughout the 2008 cycle, often working late into the night and frequently coming in on weekends.

Brian Newby, the county's election commissioner, said he was thrilled with their efforts and would like to show his appreciation somehow, but current budget constraints prevent it.

"Johnson County has frozen all salaries, like many places, but, of course, it is not a morale booster when your staff knocks the biggest election of all time out of the park and is rewarded with a zero increase," Newby said.

Furlough days, job vacancies, consolidating elections and delayed voting-machine upgrades: these are just a few problems facing state and local elections offices across the country as the economy continues to tank.

And no county, not even those among the wealthiest in the country, is immune.

In [Fairfax County, Va.](#), Rokey Suleman, general registrar, said while normal hours are being maintained at the office, two vacancies cannot be filled because of budget concerns. Further, the department is being forced to cut down on seasonal staff to make up for budgetary shortfalls.

More significantly to voters, Fairfax County will not be moving to an optical scan system because it cannot afford it right now. The machines sit idle, waiting until the county can afford to purchase the paper.

"We have mothballed our optical-scan voting equipment that was recently purchased because we cannot afford paper ballots. The transition to paper is now delayed 18 months," Suleman said. "We are relying on old DRE equipment. I have started to advocate vote-by-mail elections but do not believe that will happen in Virginia for at least a decade."

Suleman is also concerned about moving forward with technology purchases that would make the voting experience better for the voter and for his office.

"The state is currently trying to transition districts to electronic poll books. They are offering a low-cost solution," Suleman said. "We are unable to purchase a solution from an established vendor. I need to purchase online poll worker training software and cannot. I am also looking at purchasing postal equipment to streamline the absentee department but may be unable to."

Lawmakers in [Tennessee](#) are considering introducing legislation that would allow the state to delay a switch to paper ballots.

"When this bill passed last year, we were assured that it was all covered by federal money," said Rep. Glen Casada told a local television station. "Now I'm hearing that there's a possibility that our local governments will have to come up with a sizable amount of money."

Newly installed secretary of state Tre Hargett is currently conducting a fiscal review to see if it is even feasible to make the switch.

The recommended operating budget for 2009-2010 for the town of [Norwalk, Conn.](#) was released last week and in it, the town's two registrars positions were both cut to half-time.

"At the moment, we're involved in this statutorily required canvas of the voters. There isn't any time of the year where we could do the job on a part-time basis," Stuart Wells, Democratic registrar told *The Hour*. "We have 50,000 voters. There's no time of the year we could (perform the work part time)."

Cash problems are hardly limited to localities.

In Washington, the state government is facing a \$6 billion budget shortfall. According to David Ammons, communications director for [Secretary of State Sam Reed](#), every department is feeling the brunt.

"The governor has frozen travel and out-of-state training, equipment purchases, use of consultants and so forth," Ammons said. "We are downsizing every sector of the Office of Secretary of State, including some elections outreach positions, probably eliminating our statewide primary voters' pamphlet for this year and legal advertising for initiatives."

Ammons noted that because the state is largely vote-by-mail — only Pierce County still partly votes at the polls — that helps with cost cutting, but it doesn't eliminate the need for cuts.

"I haven't heard of any county auditors cutting hours, etc., but I know everyone is running short-staffed and overworked," he said.

The [Washington Legislature](#) is currently considering a bill to eliminate two of the four springtime elections.

Things aren't any better across the country in [Maryland](#) where the State Board of Elections has lost two full-time staff positions and seen other across the board cuts. While state and local employees are subject to furlough requirements, Ross Goldstein, deputy director said that state BOE and local board offices will remain open full time. Goldstein also said that HAVA funds are being expended at a faster rate to offset state general fund expenses.

In 2007, the [Maryland General Assembly](#) mandated that the state scrap its \$65 million electronic voting system and go back to paper ballots in time for the 2010 midterm elections. With just more than a year to go, the state seems to be moving forward even with looming budget difficulties.

"While some concerns have been raised, it appears that state policymakers are still prepared to move forward with the procurement and implementation of a new optical scan voting system," Goldstein said.

Which is of course good news for whichever vendor Maryland ends up going with because the economic crisis cuts across all sectors of the elections industry, including the vending sector, although David Beirne, executive director of the [Election Technology Council](#) said he believes that the impacts on the vending industry go beyond the current financial crisis.

Beirne said the industry began to suffer prior to the current economic crisis due to certification costs at the federal level and the inability to deliver product upgrades and enhancements.

"When you combine the [Election Assistance Commission](#) certification program inefficiency with dwindling financial resources at the state and county level, a perfect storm exists that will likely limit product research and development until the clouds break." Beirne said. "In this environment, government and business are looking to do more with less."

According to Jeannie Layson, director of communications for the EAC, the commission has already convened a meeting about how the federal process could help vendors save money. Layson said the commission is exploring redundancies in testing as well as ways to streamline the process.

"We understand that the voting system market is trying to adjust to meeting tougher standards, and we will continue to work with everyone to make sure the process is as efficient as possible," Layson said. "The bottom line is that voters expect and deserve a federal process that is rigorous and thorough. The days of minimal requirements for voting systems are over, and the vendors who recognize that shift will be well positioned to become future leaders in the industry."

With budget cuts and budget shortfalls part of the daily routine now, many election officials are thinking differently about how they operate including consolidating elections.

"I think the economy is going to force a lot of talk about doing things differently. It will be interesting to see, looking back in a couple of years, how many wild ideas were really adopted, not just in elections but in all industries. I think there will be a lot of talk with little change," Newby said. "For instance, we are looking, statewide, at the potential for all-mail elections while, at the same time, the Postal Service is talking about eliminating a day of delivery — even Tuesday. I expect none of that — at the Postal Service and here — will change"

And speaking of change, although there was no money specifically ear-marked for elections in the [Stimulus Package](#), it's possible that states still could allocate some funding to elections. But most likely moving forward, states and counties will have to continue to find other ways to make up for budget shortfalls.

"There just isn't any money and unfortunately the elections community in the state is not funded to the level it should be in the first place," Suleman said. "We are not cutting fat out of budgets...we are cutting limbs."

Share your story

ElectionlineWeekly knows that the economic crisis is hitting just about every elections department in the country and we would like to hear from you. Please feel free to email us your story to: mmoretti@electionline.org.

II. Election Reform News This Week

An Indiana Senate panel approved two election-related proposals this week, one that would [allow online voter registration](#) and the other would create a committee to study the state's presidential primary dates. Currently Indiana allows people to download voter registration applications online, but they must print and mail the forms, but the new legislation would allow Hoosiers to joins residents of Arizona, Washington and Utah (approved by legislature and awaiting governor's signature) to fill out and return their forms online. One bill would allow Indiana citizens to register to vote online if they have a valid driver's license or state identification card. Sen. Connie Lawson, R-Danville, said a secure Web site would allow people to register to vote or change their voter registration information quickly and easily.

There is more news this week in two ongoing stories that *electionlineWeekly* has been covering. In Florida, former Gov. Jeb Bush has come under fire in the [Hillsborough County election supervisor problems](#). Former supervisor Buddy Johnson, who is under investigation by the FBI over missing funds, was appointed by then-Governor Bush in 2003. Now some are laying the blame at Bush's feet. "It was a very poor appointment," Tampa Mayor Pam Iorio told the *St. Petersburg Times*, contrasting the Johnson pick to Crist naming former Pasco Elections Supervisor Kurt Browning as secretary of state. "When governors have these constitutional appointments to make, they really have to look at individuals who have solid backgrounds, particularly in elections. ... You have to have that attention to detail and high standards." And in [Minnesota, testimony continued in the Senate recount trial](#) this week, with much of the

attention focused on how absentee ballots were handled differently by each jurisdiction. Lawyers for Republican Norm Coleman seized on the different approaches Tuesday as evidence of varying practices by local elections officials, a theme they have sounded during the trial over Minnesota's disputed U.S. Senate election. But a lawyer for DFLer Al Franken said different practices don't demonstrate unfair standards. "There is one standard -- the law," said Marc Elias. "It doesn't mean that counties don't make mistakes within that standard. But if Mr. Coleman wants to do away with that, then he's going to ... do away with county involvement altogether and we're going to move to a national elections board." According to the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Coleman's camp has often raised the possibility that the conduct of absentee voting in Minnesota violated the equal protection clause of the U.S. Constitution. Elias says Coleman is setting the stage for an appeal to the Minnesota or U.S. Supreme Court, if he loses.

Two American Indian women have [sued the state of South Dakota after they were denied their right to vote](#) in the November 4 election. According to the lawsuit, filed with the help of the American Civil Liberties Union, the women were incorrectly removed from the voter rolls for being convicted felons. Although both women do have felony convictions, they never served jail time, only probation and the ACLU contends that state law "only disenfranchise individuals sentenced to prison and both women were just sentenced to probation." The lawsuit names as defendants Secretary of State Chris Nelson, Shannon County Auditor Sue Ganje and state board of elections members. Nelson said he did not know the suit was coming and declined to comment until he has read the document.

It's like déjà vu all over again in Palm Beach County — sort of — as a [tightly contested mayoral election will head to a recount on Saturday](#). Although the county is infamous for its recounts, the town of Palm Beach hasn't had one since 1993. According to the Palm Beach Daily News, only three votes separate the two candidates. The nearly 3,200 paper ballots fall into three categories — precinct, absentee and provisionals. There were 388 absentee ballots and 14 provisionals, all of which were counted into Tuesday's totals. The provisional ballots were cast mostly in cases where the voter forgot to bring identification to the polls, Susan Bucher, supervisor of elections, told the paper. This will be Bucher's first recount.

Correction: A candidate for Senate in Minnesota was incorrectly listed last week as Norm Franken. Clearly we meant Al Coleman. In all seriousness, the item in last week's *New This Week* should have listed the candidate as Al Franken.

III. Opinion

Alabama: [Felon voting rights](#)

Colorado: [Paper ballots, II, III](#)

Connecticut: [Instant-runoff voting](#)

Florida: [Palm Beach County](#)

Indiana: [Vote centers](#)

Michigan: [Secretary of state](#)

Minnesota: [Voter ID](#); [Election reform](#); [Election law](#)

Mississippi: [Voter ID, II, III, IV, V](#)

New Jersey: [Voting machines](#)

Texas: [Voter ID](#)

Washington: [Ex-felon voting rights](#); [Online voting](#); [Election reform](#)

***some sites require registration*

IV. Job Opportunities

All job listings must be received by 12 p.m. Eastern on Wednesday for publication in our Thursday newsletter. Job listings are free but may be edited for length. Whenever possible, include Internet information. Please email job postings to mmoretti@electionline.org

