

STATEMENT BY LANCE GOUGH, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
BOARD OF ELECTION COMMISSIONERS FOR THE CITY OF CHICAGO
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My name is Lance Gough. I have served for the past 17 years as Executive Director for the Board of Election Commissioners for the City of Chicago, one of the nation's largest election jurisdictions with approximately 1.4 million registered voters. As Executive Director, I am in charge of the day-to-day operation of the Board, and supervise a staff of 135 full-time employees and a large number of extra hire employees.

I'm the past-president of the Association of Election Commission Officials of Illinois and also the International Association of Clerks, Recorders, Elections Officials, and Treasurers.

I serve on the National Postal Task Force, which develops new programs for election officials to expedite and improve election material mail services; I am on the Illinois State Planning Committee to implement the Help America Vote Act of 2002; and the Project Advisory Board sponsored by the American Institute for Research and the Federal Election Commission, which is working on guidelines for the development of user-friendly voting systems, and conducting usability tests of voting systems.

In Chicago, I organized and serve on an Advisory Committee for People with Disabilities to help them achieve full access to the electoral system.

As you may be aware, Chicago and suburban Cook County, which comprise more than half the voters in Illinois with more than 5,100 precincts, both utilize a punchcard voting system with in-precinct tabulation. This system, which has been enhanced, allows voters to correct errors such as an overvote or an undervote. Once a ballot is issued, only the voter handles the ballot card, and after completing their candidate and proposition selections, they feed the completed card into a precinct ballot counter (PBC) which then screens for these errors, as well as ensuring that the ballot was initialed by the judges of election as required by law. If there is an overvote or undervote, the ballot is returned to the voter with a digital and printed message, which instructs the voter as to the possible error, with the option for the voter to leave the ballot as is or return to a ballot correction booth to correct any possible errors or omissions.

The ballot correction system, which did not become operational until 2002, after the infamous 2000 Presidential Election, has worked quite well. Although many voters do not correct or complete their ballots, at a minimum the ballot screening system causes them to take a second look at their vote. More importantly, they are given a second chance if they do want to make corrections.

As with most election jurisdictions throughout the nation, the year 2000 Presidential Election, with its butterfly ballots, hanging and pregnant chads, voter confusion, and a myriad of other problems, caused Chicago to take a new look at its punch card voting system, that had been operational in the city for 18 years. The city's voter fall-off of seven percent, larger than the norm, prompted us to examine every aspect of our punch card voting system. Although we found evidence that one of the molds used to manufacture the templates for the vote recorders was not engineered according to original specifications, and these templates were re-manufactured, we decided to undertake a complete review of our voting system. After many elections of usage, we were somewhat complacent in our comfort that every voter was familiar and competent in the use of this system. We were wrong.

Voters are not experts in the complexities and operation of our voting systems – whether it be touch screen, optical scan, or punch card. After all, voting is a task that may be undertaken once or twice a year or once every several years. Citizens then forget and must be re-educated in the balloting process.

Accordingly, the key to an effective voting system is simplicity. It must be a system that even the most unsophisticated voter can learn to operate successfully and quickly.

Following the 2000 Election, we formed a partnership with the American Institute of Graphic Arts, and undertook a complete redesign of our election material. The actual ballot cards were made more user-friendly for the voter to ensure that they inserted into the vote recorder and punched properly; the font type on the ballot pages was changed to make it more easily readable and the names of the candidates were moved closer to the punch numbers to provide for greater accuracy; graphic artists produced new voting instruction posters and brochures that are easy to read and understand, and which contained simple graphics; we provided our voters with more hands-on demonstration before they were given their ballot cards; and we posted a bill of rights in every polling place, outlining the basic rights of all voters.

Professionals produced a two-minute video explaining the voting process, and this was played throughout the voting day in every precinct polling place. A lengthier version of this instructional video was streamed on our internet site, and hundreds of these videos were sent to political organizations and civic groups. Every Chicago voter was sent a brochure explaining the use of the punch card system, and the ballot screening features.

The school of instruction for our judges of election was revamped to provide additional information and to make judges more sensitive to the needs and questions of the voters. The training video for the judges of election has now been segmented into three sections so as to reinforce the training process. The manual utilized for judge training has been expanded with new graphics and information.

Again, the key has been repetition and simplicity.

In the precinct polling place, on election day, voters are given every assistance and instruction in ensuring that they are able to cast a ballot with ease. At the time they apply for a ballot, they are offered a demonstration on how to use the punchcard system. Inside the voting booth, prominently posted, are voting instructions. After completing the ballot, the voter then proceeds to the precinct ballot counter, which again has simple instructions and diagrams posted.

For the elderly or people with disabilities, there is a special voting booth in every precinct polling place designed to accommodate a wheel chair or provide seating for the elderly. A special handi-hold stylus, which is easy to grip, is available in every polling place, as well as a ballot magnifier.

For those who primarily speak a language other than English, we have a special publication entitled "We Speak Your Language" available in every polling place. This booklet provides in the 15 major languages spoken in Chicago, the qualifications for voting; how to apply for a ballot; how to vote on the punchcard system; how to request voting assistance; how to screen the voted ballot; how to reach Election Central for additional assistance; and the rights of a voter.

Although voting is a simple process, it can be intimidating for the first-time voter, for the elderly, and for those who are not completely fluent in the English language. Therefore, it is our duty as election administrators to make them as comfortable as possible, encouraging them to ask questions or to seek assistance. An intimidated voter is a one-time voter, unlikely to return in the near future.

Whenever anything new is introduced into the electoral process, it requires extensive planning, training, and voter education. Introduction of a new voting system is particularly challenging.

In Chicago, we had provisional balloting for the first time in the March 16, 2004 Election. Despite providing judges of election with training and technical support, many judges had difficulty in administering this safety net for voters whose registration records did not reach the polling place. Unfortunately, some voters who went to the wrong polling place were erroneously given provisional ballots by judge of election instead of being sent to the correct precinct. Judges in other precincts failed to assist voters in filling out the proper provisional ballot affidavit. For the November 2 General Election, we have revamped and expanded our judge of election instruction to ensure this important provisional balloting program is properly administered.

We have redesigned all of our affidavits and forms for the judges, and even provided

them with color coordinated envelopes and forms so they are properly and correctly maintained. Again, it is simplicity.

Despite all of these precautions, mistakes are made in the electoral process. Just as there is no perfect human being, there are no perfect elections.

But, during my tenure at the Chicago Board of Election Commissioners I have seen many improvements. Voter fraud, political interference, and other irregularities are rare rather than commonplace.

If I had to rank the most important ingredient in a well-run election, it would be to have trained and dedicated judges of election in every precinct polling place. Although we have hundreds of experienced and competent judges, filling 14,000 positions every election cycle is a difficult and challenging task. In too many precincts, we have judges of election who fail to serve on election day, or who inadvertently make errors.

We continue to refine and expand our school of instruction for judges to ensure that these citizen poll workers have the expertise and support to serve their fellow citizens in this most important capacity. We want to guarantee that every vote counts in every election.