Summary of Findings from the Independent Assessment of the March 2020 Primary Election Issues

Los Angeles County, California

slalom

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BACKGROUND

During the 2020 primary election, Los Angeles County launched its new Voting Solutions for All People (VSAP), a highly ambitious project that dramatically changed the experience of voting in the nation's most populous county. Although many voters welcomed the improvements, many others experienced significant challenges, including excessive wait times at Vote Centers.

To understand these challenges and develop recommendations to improve the voter experience and election systems for November 2020, Los Angeles County[1] hired Slalom, a strategy, business, and technology consulting company, to perform an assessment focused on the **Vote Center** and **Vote by Mail (VBM)** process and election systems that were in place over the 11-day primary election voting period (from February 21 through Mar 3, 2020). In addition, Slalom was asked to review the Registrar-Recorder's corrective action plan, as well as conduct a feasibility study on expanding the VBM ballot process.

Slalom's assessment revolved around the key areas of people, process, technology, and communications and specifically focused on the following areas of concern identified by the County:

- Excessive Vote Center wait times
- Vote Center staffing issues
- Vote Center support staffing and response time
- Vote Center facilities issues (including process issues)
- VBM ballot distribution process and timing of 17,000 ballots
- The incorrect omission of "Measure FD" on ballots in portions of three cities

VOTING ASSESSMENT APPROACH

During this intensive seven-week Voting Assessment, Slalom interviewed more than 50 County stakeholders and Vote Center workers, received more than 250 voter survey responses, performed 15 voter interviews and analyzed more than 10 relevant data sets. To comply with the Safer at Home orders issued during the COVID-19 public health emergency, the entire Voting Assessment was conducted virtually and in a highly collaborative manner among Slalom, Los Angeles County executives, managers, and staff, and other key stakeholders.

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[1] Slalom was retained by Los Angeles County Counsel on behalf of the County of Los Angeles.

FINDINGS

Our key findings include the following:

- **Excessive Vote Center wait times:**

  o **The ePollbook technology used to check-in voters at Vote Centers was not adequate for LA County's size and scope:** Design and testing issues with the voter check-in technology caused the system to freeze frequently, resulting in long delays and bottlenecks during check-in at Vote Centers and requiring workers to provide provisional ballots to many voters who otherwise would have been permitted to vote in the traditional manner. Some of the specific issues identified include:
    - The ePollbook design required devices to use significant processing power to sync during peak voter check-in times
    - ePollbook system was not tested accordingly to meet the needs of a County the size of Los Angeles
    - Inability to confirm performance of devices at each Voting Center location due to last minute determination and confirmation of Vote Center locations and set up

  o **Improper ratios of staff and equipment**: Improper ratios of staff to ePollbook check-in devices meant that there were often not enough ePollbooks and/or workers to maximize the check-in process at many Vote Centers. The variance in staffing and equipment was attributed to a combination of factors:
    - A late start in determining and confirming the locations of Vote Centers led to shortfalls in vote center staff and impacted the training of vote center staff
    - Inaccurate estimates of the ratio of ePollbooks to Ballot Marking Devices (BMD) needed to enable Vote Centers to handle the volume of voters
    - Issues with equipment tracking and transportation leading to an uneven distribution of ePollbooks and BMDs across Vote Centers

  o **Shortcomings in communication and outreach strategy and execution:** Despite making significant investments in an outreach strategy, the public communication and outreach campaign budget and messaging strategies were not maximized across advertising channels. The goal of early voting by 33% of voters, a critical variable to ensure Vote Center processes and technologies operated as expected, was missed due to lack of voter awareness and education about early voting options. Instead, only 28% of voters took advantage of Early Voting.

- **Vote Center staffing issues:**

  o Some Vote Centers experienced staffing shortages and lacked properly trained staff to support efficient voting operations. Insufficient staffing amplified check-in technology issues as there were not enough staff and they did not have training or resource guides to troubleshoot the ePollbook technology issues during the check-in process.
  o Gaps in processes for re-confirming workers by phone or email during the week prior to the election also contributed to last minute no-shows.

- **Call centers unable to support Vote Center staffing, leading to long response times:**

  o The IT and Operations call centers were understaffed during the election to address the call volumes caused by the magnitude of the changes implemented (such as new technologies) and the impact of last minutes modifications (such as location changes).
  o Call center support was further strained by only 18 call system licenses available for use among the 40 IT call center agents available to answer calls. Not all agents could be utilized at the same time which severely restricted their call processing times.

- **Vote Center selection and process issues:**

  o The Vote Center selection and confirmation process started too late and was not completed in a timely manner. This late start to Vote Center identification and recruitment processes had many negative downstream effects, including:
    - Fewer Vote Centers than planned
    - Poor communications with Vote Center locations regarding setup
    - Late or no communication with Vote Center staff, which led to many Vote Center lead workers not reporting for the election
    - Uneven distribution of Vote Centers, equipment and staff across neighborhoods
    - Inaccurate and late communication of Vote Center locations to vote center staff and the public
    - Limited ability to conduct performance testing of ePollbook check-in device functioning prior to start of voting

- **VBM ballot distribution process and timing inefficiency:**

  o Registrar Recorder technical staff capacity and skills were not sufficient for the required tasks of database extraction, leading to an error that resulted in approximately 17,000 VBM ballots being delayed in mailing.

- **Incorrect omission of "Measure FD" on ballots in portions of three cities:**

  o The Fire Department submitted a late request for inclusion of a ballot measure. Proper documentation, including updated maps, was not submitted to verify the Fire Department jurisdiction of voters. This led to

inaccuracies in the addresses of voters whose ballots should have included the measure.

- o Insufficient quality assurance processes failed to identify the issue prior to ballots being printed, requiring a second round of printing and mailing of the ballots.

- **Overarching quality control breakdowns and vendor management issues:**

  - o Inadequate vendor and timeline management resulted in a lack of quality assurance for election processes and technology deployments. Poor technology vendor management resulted in the lack of identification of critical design issues. This led to long wait times and a poor voter experience during the election.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the various issues and challenges experienced during the 2020 primary election, the recommendations that should be implemented in the near term include the following:

- **Excessive Vote Center wait times:**

  - o Mandate monitoring and adequate performance testing of all technologies used during elections to ensure systems can handle LA County voter demand, most importantly, the ePollbook check-in devices.
  - o Improve ePollbook technology design, network, and software to optimize the voter check-in process.
  - o Implement recommendations to improve staffing, training and Vote Center recruitment to reduce downstream impacts on voter experience and wait times.

- **Vote Center staffing issues:**

  - o Increase communications to Vote Center staff leading up to the election, both in terms of the frequency of communications sent, and methods of communications (such as email, website, phone, mail, etc.).
  - o Expand hands-on component of in-person Vote Center worker training, including worst case scenario coaching, and put in place better tracking around training completion and comprehension.
  - o Establish channels and framework for Vote Center lead workers to communicate with other Vote Centers and to designated operations points of contact during the election.

- **Vote Center support staffing and response times:**

  - o Assign operations team members to travel between vote centers and be available to help resolve issues with equipment, processes, and staffing throughout the election.

- o Ensure call centers are appropriately staffed and equipped with the correct number of call system licenses needed to answer calls and respond to support requests.

- **Vote Center selection and process issues:**

  - o Begin Vote Center selection and recruitment activities as soon as possible for the upcoming General Election. For future major elections, aim to begin Vote Center selection activities as far as one year in advance.
  - o Improve and/or establish a Vote Center resource management and tracking tool to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the administration and logistics of election operations.
  - o Establish standardized communications templates and schedules that can be leveraged by County employees who are coordinating Vote Center selection and confirmation activities.

- **VBM ballot distribution process and timing inefficiency:**

  - o Ensure Registrar-Recorder technical staff are properly trained and have the required skill sets to extract voter information from the Election Management System database.
  - o Build quality assurance / control processes for ballot generation processes and ballot measure submissions, including exception processing (i.e. late filing).

- **Incorrect omission of "Measure FD" on ballots in portions of three cities:**

  - o Quality assurance procedures must be implemented to ensure that ballot measures are correctly associated with appropriate jurisdictional boundaries.
  - o Greater outreach and communication are needed with jurisdictions to ensure that ballot measure requests are timely and in the required format.

- **Overarching quality control breakdowns and vendor management issues:**

  - o Establish a management framework, including service level agreements, quality assurance checkpoints and risk management mechanisms for key vendor agreements. The framework should include:
    - Election technology vendors, including those responsible for the ePollbook check-in devices and the BMDs
    - Call center and technical support contractors
    - Transportation and logistics contractors
    - Voter outreach and communications consultants

- **Overarching outreach and communications:**

  - o Enhance LAVote.net website content and functionality.

- o Work with a professional communications consulting firm to execute the defined campaign strategy and maximize audience reach and budget.
- o The consulting firm should assist the Registrar-Recorder in the development of a strong media mix and audience targeting strategy to achieve goals for the upcoming election campaign, including:
  - ▪ Key demographics to reach
  - ▪ Proportion of outreach to devote to each group
  - ▪ Voter behavior segments to target
  - ▪ Campaign success criteria

VBM Expansion

Part of our engagement was to review the RR/CC's Corrective Action Plan and VBM expansion plan. We agree with the County's detailed plan. Our comments are focused on expanding and strengthening the Corrective Action Plan recommendations around topics such as quality assurance and controls, importance of cost range analysis and vendor management of VBM expansion, stronger tools and models for Vote Center support and management, and greater communication of new processes, policies, and procedures. Our highest priority recommendations for VBM expansion are:

- Improved vendor management is recommended, especially as the County uses more vendors to support its operations in this area.   This includes greater oversight, capacity planning and solution validation.
- Cost planning should include a range of assumptions given the variability of voter turnout, VBM participation, etc. These ranges will then inform possible costs for VBM expansion.

CONCLUSION

For the 2020 primary election, Los Angeles County debuted its new VSAP voting system with the aim of enhancing the democratic process for voters and expanding access and opportunity to vote. VSAP had been in development for many years before its debut yet, despite the preparation and planning, many voters experienced challenges. We have isolated the causes of those challenges, validated the recommendations for corrective action made by the Registrar Recorder, and developed several additional recommendations for improvement.

The recent Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors motion to expand VBM in time for the November general election underscores the importance of learning from the challenges that took place during the primary election of 2020 and implementing the recommendations to improve election operations and voter awareness. This is of vital importance during the COVID-19 pandemic, so that physical distancing and other public health requirements do not contribute to excessive wait times at Vote Centers.

Slalom believes Los Angeles County is committed to taking the necessary steps to implement our recommendations. With improved Vote Center staffing approaches and training, increased technology capacity, more effective communications and outreach, and stronger vendor management, Los Angeles County can enhance the voter experience and election systems for November 2020 and beyond.