

Commissioners

MARISEL A. HERNANDEZ, *Chairwoman*
WILLIAM J. KRESSE, *Commissioner/Secretary*
JONATHAN T. SWAIN, *Commissioner*
LANCE GOUGH, *Executive Director*



Remarks of Marisel A. Hernandez, Chairwoman
Board of Election Commissioners for the City of Chicago

October 25, 2017

Ladies and Gentlemen of the City Council, I am proud to report to you today that the electoral franchise in Chicago is sound, and we are working hard to meet the challenges set by the legislature and government in order to provide the best and most accessible service to our voters. With me today are: Commissioner/Secretary William J. Kresse; Commissioner Jonathan T. Swain; Executive Director Lance Gough; our new Legal Counsel Adam Lasker; Communications Director Jim Allen; and Deputy Chief Administrative Officer Peter Peso.

On behalf of the entire agency, I thank you for having us here today to review our proposed budget for the coming year and to answer your questions.

The Chicago Election Board will be entering the busiest part of the four-year election cycle. In 2018, the Election Board will conduct two full citywide elections: the March Primary and the November General Election. Even as we manage Early Voting in September, the Election Board will be managing issues related to petition filings for the 2019 Municipal Elections.

I'd like to note some remarkable trends and let you know how the Board intends to deal with and confront the challenges we face ahead.

- First, we are excited about the signing of the Automatic Voter Registration legislation, as it will have an impact on streamlining the rolls starting in mid-2019. The state is projecting it will take that long to develop the Automatic Voter Registration system based on the simultaneous construction of the Secretary of State's "Real ID" program. In the meantime, we have already embarked on a media campaign to inform Chicago residents that the Illinois AVR system will not

be in effect right away and that they will need to register if they intend to vote in 2018. We will continue to work with last-minute rushes of voter registrations during the 45-day periods ahead of each Election Day. We anticipate an average of 100,000 new registrations, including name-and-address changes, during the build-up to each of those elections, through the Board's newer online registration system, as well as in person registrations during Early Voting and then, on Election Day. We have successfully promoted online registration – Chicago leads the state by far – as the system that provides the most accurate and cost-effective method of registration.

- For the group of voters who wait until the last possible day, Election Day, the Board handled more than 30,000 registrations at both the March 2016 Primary and the November 2016 General Election. Chicago easily led the State of Illinois in terms of new registrations and address and name changes completed on Election Day in the precinct polling places.
- To prepare for this activity, we took many steps aimed at preventing lines on Election Day. These steps have included:
 - (1) promoting Early Voting and Vote By Mail;
 - (2) promoting online registration with an Illinois driver's license or Illinois State ID card;
 - (3) opening the new Loop Super Site at 15 W. Washington to boost citywide capacity for Early Voting and Registration;
 - (4) training and placing an Election Coordinator in each of our 2,069 precincts to help handle Election Day Registrations;
 - (5) providing a second Electronic Poll Book in each precinct. In two dozen precincts, mostly near colleges and universities, we provide a third Electronic Poll Book based on above-average Election Day registrations at those sites; and
 - (6) partnering with our college and university administrators to encourage students to register during Early Voting and not wait until Election Day.

Formatted: Do not check spelling or grammar

- At the 2016 General Election, more people used Vote By Mail than any time in the last 70 years. This campaign was a complete success in terms of both the sheer number who used the system and the new services we provided voters to make it run smoothly. We had more than 100,000 people apply to Vote By Mail and approximately 92,000 returned ballots – the highest numbers for mail-in ballots since Chicagoans were spread around the globe during World War II. We enhanced our system to be able to send out emails to tell voters that their ballots were on the way – and then sent follow-up emails to let them know when their ballots had arrived. Our online application system also included several safeguards to ensure that we received complete mailing addresses for the voters. This proved especially valuable in serving students in university dormitories around the country.
- Our voter rolls have approximately 1.5 million active registrations. We recently completed a canvass that helped update the rolls and capture more than 200,000 records where indications are the voters have moved in recent months. As you may know, even though State law requires a canvass at least once every two years, Chicago has long performed this exercise each and every year because of the residential turnover in many neighborhoods, particularly where there are more rental units.
- In terms of youth engagement, the Chicago Election Board continues to lead the nation. We have more than 2,000 high school and college students staffing our polling places. The success of this effort stands as one of our greatest sources of pride.
- Last year, the Board entered a three-way settlement agreement regarding accessible polling places that avoided the prospect of costly litigation. We are proud to be working with Equip for Equality and the U.S. Department of Justice on a plan to provide accessible polling places at 100 percent of our precincts. Because the Election Board is in the process of implementing this plan under the most recent and most stringent federal guidelines, this will require the Board to modify some polling places and in certain instances, change the location of other

sites. At the same time, we will have to engage in an informational campaign to make certain that voters know where to vote in March and November 2018.

In advance of the upcoming elections, the Board will be mailing notices to approximately 1.1 million voter households with information on their Election Day polling place, Early Voting sites and Vote By Mail. We also will be emphasizing our multi-lingual web site at chicagoelections.com, which also has a mobile version. Both the pre-election mailing and the web site are geared to answer to the single most common question: Where Do I Vote?

Looking to next year, the Board of Election Commissioners for the City of Chicago has a recommended budget from the City of \$15,606,377.

In comparing FY2018 to FY2016, when we had two citywide elections, this represents an increase of approximately \$842,000. Factors that necessitate this increase include the following:

- Postage rates will rise by 20%, unavoidable as many operations – particularly registration verification and canvass mailings – are required to be performed through the US Postal Service;
- Back-up servers are needed to bolster system security;
- Web services for Military and Overseas voters that previously were covered under a Pentagon grant expired in 2016;
- New costs related to the measuring and monitoring polling-place accessibility under the new settlement agreement with the U.S. Department of Justice;
- Electoral Board functions in advance of both the 2018 and 2019 elections;
- Increased rent for the Board's offices and lower level rooms for Vote By Mail processing, and rent for the newer 15 W. Washington Early Voting Super Site;
- Printers and server connectivity equipment for the Electronic Poll Books;
- New leasing equipment to process Vote By Mail ballots. Previously, the City and County were able to share this equipment until ballot volumes grew so much to make that impossible.

Formatted: Do not check spelling or grammar

In preparing this budget, the Board has paid close attention to the City's need to conserve its financial resources. At the same time, the Board must follow state and federal mandates by the legislative, judicial and executive branches to administer transparent, impartial and accurate election systems that fulfill the needs of the citizens of the City of Chicago.

To this end, we are holding the line on costs through the use of technology, especially with the advent of online voter registration, which helps us manage records more efficiently and reduce manual data entry and related overtime expenses. Similarly, we have replaced our Voter Registration and Election Management System. The newer system simplifies tasks related to polling places, election judge assignment, ballot orders, routine production of reports for campaigns, and FOIA requests. Additionally, we have continued to introduce new online systems for voters, such as an online application to serve as an Election Judge and an online application to Vote By Mail.

During 2018, we will continue to examine options for enhancing and improving voting equipment and systems.

Formatted: Line spacing: Multiple 1.4 li

Formatted: Font: (Default) Arial, Complex Script Font: Arial

Looking further ahead, it is time for the State of Illinois to consider options that have been implemented in other forward-thinking jurisdictions, particularly California, Oregon, Washington and Colorado. These jurisdictions either have transitioned or have given local election authorities the power to conduct most or all of their voting through Vote By Mail. In the most recent November 2016 election, the successful new system in Colorado meant that more than 90 percent of the 2.8 million ballots cast were submitted by mail or in drop boxes – meaning that just about 200,000 were cast in person at a reduced number of universal vote centers. Fewer sites provided for more and better-trained staff at each location.

Formatted: Font: (Default) Arial, Complex Script Font: Arial

This is a vision we should consider and embrace, particularly in light of the need to reduce expenditures, increase accessibility, and manage the ever-expanding technology that our poll workers must operate.

Formatted: Do not check spelling or grammar

In closing, I want to emphasize something very important. We at the Chicago Election Board are very fortunate for the assistance we receive not only through the City Council, but also from the leaders of so many public agencies: the Department of Fleet & Facility Management, the Budget Office, the Chicago Public Schools, the Police Department, the Chicago Public Library, the Chicago Park District, City Colleges and a variety of other agencies. These partner agencies are critical to our ability to offer successful Early Voting and Election Day Voting programs.

Perhaps the best example of that spirit of cooperation came recently with the Department of Fleet & Facility Management, which did an excellent job of helping us rapidly convert the shell of an old Walgreen's drug store into the new Loop Super Site for Early Voting and Registration. That Super Site helped us handle three times as many voters every day as our old basement site. In turn, that basement site is now being used to help process that modern record we set in Vote By Mail ballots. These developments are the key reasons that we were able to avoid long lines in most precincts on Election Day – even while offering Election Day Registration in every precinct.

With that, I look forward to answering your questions.