

TIOGA COUNTY BOARD OF ELECTIONS

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2020 Annual Report to Tioga County

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We began 2020 with 52 Election Law changes from 2019, in addition to it being a presidential year. A presidential year is always busier than any other year: there is greater interest in voting, more absentee requests, and higher voter turnout on Election Day. A presidential year is always our busiest and we prepare for that, but nothing could have prepared us for what happened in 2020.

Every time a law changes it requires new or updated office policies and procedures: how does that effect our calendar; what are the time lines; what staffing is going to be needed; what training needs to happen for staff, inspectors or both; what supplies need to be purchased; is new equipment needed; what training is needed on the new equipment for staff, inspectors or both, and how do we do that training? Now imagine doing that for all 52 new laws and the time it takes to get all of that done.

The items on our calendar were already overlapping with the changes to the political calendar, 27 days of early voting, a third election and not just any election - a presidential. The year ahead looked daunting, but we did what we always do: we adapt, we plan, and we move forward to get the work done. We held extra Election Inspector trainings in February, to help boost our inspector numbers for the Presidential Primary. Then COVID hit. We had an emergency shutdown, our office went to a skeleton crew, and we had to figure out how to still do everything we are required to do. Petitions were being circulated, then the petition process and calendar changed with an executive order.

Our annual Mail Check notices were mailed in late March as well, which resulted in hundreds of pieces of return mail that all had to be processed, and voter registration files updated. Additionally, now we had a whole new process with county-to-county transfers, so that every returned piece of mail that had a forwarding address in another NY county had to be processed and sent to that county so they could transfer and register that voter in their county. Once that was complete we were notified via NYSVoter, the NYS voter registration database, so the transferred voters could be purged in our county voter database to make sure they can't vote in two places.

We still moved forward. We had a Presidential Primary to administer: ballots to design, proof and order; voting machines to test; absentee envelopes to prepare for the mailing of military, overseas, and permanent absentee voters; inspectors to schedule to work early voting and election day.

Next, we were told the Presidential Primary is postponed (then cancelled, then back on), and it's to be held on the same day as the state and local primaries in June. However, election inspectors were calling - they won't work. We struggled to find PPE supplies and cleaning materials for poll sites, especially disinfectant, until finally the EMS department received the wipes we needed at the last hour. We were ordered to mail every eligible voter for the primary election an absentee ballot application,

along with a postage-paid return envelope. Voters could now request an absentee ballot if they were afraid they would be exposed to COVID-19, and they could do so without a signature. So we had to order a vast amount of absentee envelopes in anticipation of the high number of absentee requests. This became one large domino effect; we could not get one thing done before ten more were being thrown at us. Yet, we managed to get through the primary, despite having only 50% of our usual Election Day workers. The central count scanner we purchased with grant funding was integral to the success of our post-election processes in 2020.

Every executive order and law passed that affected elections increased the amount of work required of every board of elections. We were already dealing with limited time, resources, money, staff and space, but there was no relief between the Primary Election and the General, no matter how hard we prayed.

Returning inspectors had to be re-trained, and new inspectors had to be recruited and trained to make up for all those we lost for fear of the pandemic. For their part, the media and the NYS Board of Elections were a blessing for helping get the word out for our need. We were able to recruit more than enough workers and we held extra trainings, so that we could assign additional workers at most poll sites to accommodate the new disinfecting requirements and help enforce social distancing. Unfortunately, while we were booked up with our inspector trainings, the media was still advertising the shortage of election workers, and many interested people could not be trained. Also, some of the people who were trained could not be assigned because we had so many.

Concurrently with all this inspector training, another mailing had to be sent to every eligible voter so they knew when, where, and how they can vote. Voters could again request an absentee ballot if they were afraid they would be exposed to COVID-19, again without a signature, and now through an online portal set up by NYSBOE. The absentee envelopes were revised to be more understandable, so we had to re-order our stock and could not use anything we had previously ordered before the primary. Voter registration was on the rise, and every new voter registration we received had to be researched in NYSVoter to see if they were registered in another county, and if they were, we had to transfer them to our county. Ballots needed to be programmed & proofed, voting machines needed to be tested. Additional supplies needed to be purchased, and we had to borrow space from other departments because we had no room for it all. Temporary staff needed to be hired. Extra tables were set up where possible for temporary staff to help with the absentee mailing, we could barely walk thru the office. To say we were drowning in absentees is an understatement. The absentees came in as fast as they went out. Arrangements had to be made with our mail room and the post office to accommodate the large volume of absentee mail. An absentee drop box was ordered and installed near the main entrance of our building, so people could drop off their ballots in person without having to go inside. Then there was the cure process and everything that entailed. It was nothing short of controlled chaos, and the phones did not stop ringing.

We were effectively moved to a vote by mail system, in addition to holding in-person Early Voting and Election Day, without any of the preparation, increase in funding, staffing, office space, or proper equipment to handle the overwhelming increase in absentee mail. Yes, other states have a vote by mail system but they had the time to develop the procedures and obtain the equipment needed. Post-election, Tioga County was involved in the litigation regarding the 22nd Congressional District.

Fortunately for us, we were the only county involved where no errors were found, but the fallout from that case demonstrates that so many procedural changes all at once and without proper preparation can pave a path to failure.

If it were not for the steadfast dedication of the BOE staff to serve our voters, all these changes could have sunk boards of elections across the state. The number of hours that were worked by commissioners and deputies that they will never be paid for, the weeks that were worked without a day off, the 12+ hour days that were worked by everyone, and the personal sacrifices that were made by everyone to make sure the 2020 elections happened, must not be discounted.