
Executive Summary

The Help America Vote Act (HAVA) was enacted by Congress to reform the nation's voting process. The Act addresses improvements to voting systems and voter access that were identified following the 2000 Presidential Election. It includes requirements for a centralized voter registration system, elimination of punch card voting systems, privacy and independence in the voting process for voters with disabilities, and voter outreach.

One specific requirement of HAVA was that each state provide a means for voters to easily, and without cost to the voter, track the status of their provisional ballot. This could be done in a number of ways, one suggestion being the implementation of a toll free telephone number that voters could access statewide. The State of Oregon Secretary of State viewed this as a golden opportunity to improve both the education of, and the access to information by, the citizens of Oregon. Two comprehensive resources, 1 866 ORE VOTES and the Elections Question & Answers website (www.uhavavote.org/elect_q_a/main.html), were developed for citizens to use to get all of their elections questions answered.

Elections are held many times throughout the year and each one brings many questions from both new and seasoned voters. Prior to March 2004, the only ways voters could get answers to their many questions were by calling the State Elections Division, County Elections Offices, or by piecing together bits of information from various websites.

The State Elections Division and County Elections Offices have small staffs ranging in size from 3-20 people, depending on the size of the county. In a big election like the November 2004 General Election, elections staffs are steeped in paperwork including processing voter registration cards, campaign finance reporting, absentee ballot request forms and a host of other processes. Much of this paperwork has to be completed by certain deadlines to ensure eligible citizens have their chance to vote. In the past, staffs were not only buried in paperwork but were also inundated with phone calls in the days leading up to the election. This often resulted in poor customer service to constituents, an increase in costly overtime hours, and elections workers dealing with large amounts of stress.

The introduction of 1 866 ORE VOTES and the Elections Question & Answers website has provided an opportunity for the Secretary of State and the Elections Division to vastly improve Government to Citizen services. Most importantly, this project offers the citizens of Oregon easy access to accurate answers for specific or general elections questions. It has had the additional value of substantially decreasing the stress and the number of overtime hours required by staff at both the Oregon State Elections Division and County Elections Offices during the busy and hectic times surrounding any election cycle.

Approximately 70 of the most common questions that people have about elections in Oregon can now be answered by calling the toll free line or visiting the website. Citizens can also get important elections dates, learn the definitions of common elections terms and those who use the website have immediate links to other relevant resources, forms and documents.

The accessible Elections Questions and Answers website, which mirrors the training manual used by the call center representatives, uses clear graphic design based on the models established by the organization Design for Democracy. Oregon was the first state to acknowledge the importance of graphic design in enhancing elections communication. In April 2005, the website received an Honorable Mention in the Public Service category of the 2005 Horizon Interactive Awards.

Project Description

Phase one of the project concerned the implementation of the toll free line. Unique to this implementation is the fact that the toll free line is channeled through both the infrastructure and the resources of the call center at the Oregon State Correctional Institution (OSCI). This is a minimum-security facility that has been used to successfully handle calls for the Secretary of State Corporation Division for several years. Expansion of the call center to be able to handle calls for the Elections Division was an easy choice after cost-analysis showed it to be the most cost-effective of all solutions under consideration.

The HAVA team developed a paperless training manual for the call center representatives. The content of the manual was based on the answers to a myriad of questions that are regularly received by the County Elections Offices throughout the state. The manual was developed using an interactive pdf file that allows the call center representative to quickly access answers to the questions they receive. The manual anticipates multiple questions by the caller and provides hyperlinks throughout the document to facilitate accurate answers and good customer service.

The call center is designed so that, if the representative cannot answer the question, the call can quickly be transferred to the appropriate County Elections Office or the State Elections Division. As of May 2005, the call center has taken over 33,000 calls from Oregon citizens. During this time the call center representatives at OSCI have been able to fulfill over 55% of these calls on site and have transferred the remainder to the county or state for fulfillment.

Phase Two of the project was the development and implementation of the accessible Elections Questions & Answers website. The website, which mirrors the training manual used by the call center representatives, uses clear graphic design based on the models established by the organization Design for Democracy. Oregon was the first state to acknowledge the importance of graphic design in enhancing elections communication by using these models. Since June of 2004, the website has been visited over 9800 times, and it received an Honorable Mention in the Public Service category of the 2005 Horizon Interactive Awards.

Phase Three of the project included the development of an application built in ArcView, a Geographic Information System (GIS) application. This desktop application enables call center service representatives to give exact locations and addresses of the nearest ballot dropsite to callers. The caller need only give the representative the names of the streets of the nearest intersection and within a few seconds the representative can direct the caller to the nearest ballot dropsite. This application alone allowed the call center to fulfill over 3200 calls during a two-day period in the November 2004 General Election.

In the future, the State Elections Division will expand the types of questions that are answered through the call center and website, continue to explore options to decrease the cost of operation, expand and further develop the GIS application, and develop a training/education module based on these tools for election worker training and for potential classroom use in public schools.

Significance to Improvement in Government

The toll free line and website represent two elections innovations. First, the toll free line provides a free telephone number to every citizen in Oregon that needs to access information about elections. It is operated through the call center at the Oregon State Correctional Institution (OSCI). As a requirement of state law, eligible inmates must work 40 hours a week to develop job skills and help pay for the cost of their incarceration. The OSCI call center has been in operation for several years answering calls for the Secretary of State Corporation Division and the Oregon Health Plan. Adding 1 866 ORE VOTES as another customer was a simple process that was easy and quick to implement, leveraged the infrastructure and resources already in place, and provided instant access to all citizens. While this project is providing a valuable service to the citizens of Oregon it also has the benefit of providing inmates with the opportunity to learn valuable vocational skills and work ethics as part of their overall rehabilitation and eventual return to society.

Any questions that cannot be answered by the call center representative are forwarded to either the State Elections Division or the appropriate County Elections Office. This ensures that the answers callers get will be accurate. Using the OSCI call center to handle calls for 1 866 ORE VOTES has been a tremendous success and a huge value to the citizens of Oregon. From March 2004 to May 2005, 33,207 calls have been taken, and approximately 55% of these calls have been fulfilled in-house rather than being transferred to an elections office. That means that there were 18,263 fewer calls to the State Elections Division and the County Elections Offices over the last 14 months.

The accessible Elections Questions & Answers website, which mirrors the training/reference manual used by the call center representatives, uses clear graphic design based on the models established by the organization Design for Democracy. Design for Democracy was established after the 2000 Presidential election to prove that clear graphic design plays a significant role in how information is communicated to the public. Oregon was the first state to hire a full-time graphic designer to implement Design for Democracy's strategies. Adherence to these strategies has resulted in elections materials that are easy to read and understand and has helped to improve the overall election process in Oregon.

Additionally, the website was designed to be completely accessible to people with disabilities, especially to citizens with visual impairments or those using assistive technology to access the information. It is also designed in compliance with the World Wide Web Consortium standards. Between June of 2004 and May of 2005, the website was visited over 9800 times without any direct advertising of the site. For future elections, this valuable resource will be merged with the heavily advertised website Oregonvotes.org.

Benefits realized by Service Recipients, Taxpayers, Agency or State

Most importantly, the citizens of the State of Oregon have benefited from this project. It is now easier than ever for them to get answers to questions regarding where to vote, how to register, where to drop their ballot, how to receive assistance and a host of other important questions. The toll free line also ensures that every voter has the opportunity to verify whether or not his or her provisional ballot has been counted. This project has produced valuable educational tools that can be further enhanced and delivered to voters through partnerships with other educational service providers and agencies.

Secondly, the State Elections Division and the County Elections Offices have also benefited from the implementation of this project. For example, all noticed a significant reduction in the number of telephone calls during the peak election times. As the toll free telephone number becomes more ubiquitous with all voters the number of calls should continue to drop. Also, when a call is transferred from the call center to an elections office, the amount of time the elections worker needs to spend on the phone is reduced because the call center representative has already answered part of the question. The overall effect has been a decrease in the amount of time elections staff need to fulfill calls and a higher level of customer service to all callers.

Third, the call center has saved the taxpayers money. The cost-benefit analysis done prior to implementation showed the cost savings that could be realized by using the OSCI call center. It was the most cost-effective method of implementing a toll free line which the state was required to do as a result of HAVA. Below are the comparative costs between outsourcing, building up capacity to take the calls in-house and using the OSCI call center:

	Outsourcing	In-House	OSCI call center
2003–2005 biennium	\$51,299	\$160,942	\$34,822
2005–2007 biennium	\$64,799	\$196,073	\$38,602

A fourth benefit to the state is realized by using the OSCI call center. The benefit is that inmates are being productive and gaining marketable work skills and ethics during the time they are incarcerated. This may very well help to alleviate recidivism for those who are released back to society.

Fifth, improved customer service for Spanish-speaking Oregonians is another benefit of the toll free line. There are a minimum of two bilingual call center representatives who provide service to Spanish-speaking callers during the hours of operation. An estimated 122,484 Spanish-speaking Oregonians speak English less than “very well” according to the US Census Bureau. Not every county elections office has one or more bilingual employees on staff. The toll free line, therefore, has saved them the cost of having to hire a bilingual staff person or to provide interpretive services by outsourcing to another entity. It also improves their ability to serve all of their constituents.

Finally, users of the Elections Questions & Answers website have the benefit of an easy to use resource that they can access 24 hours a day. The clean and simple design ensures that anyone who has access to the internet can utilize the site without interference from unnecessary JavaScripts or Flash movies. Even users with visual impairments can navigate easily because of the accessible design and compliance with standards.

Overall, these two resources were implemented with intentional thought and design toward the potential benefits to all Oregon citizens, Oregon taxpayers, and elections staff throughout the state.

Return on Investment, Short-term/Long-term Payback

The financial savings since the inception of 1 866 ORE VOTES and the Elections Questions & Answers website are difficult to quantify as there is no way to actually know how much overtime would have been paid had these resources not been in place. However, it is estimated that 18,263 calls were fulfilled completely in-house by the call center representatives, and there were 9800 visits to the Elections Questions & Answers website. Assuming that each fulfilled call and each site visit saved elections employees 5 minutes, the call center and the website saved the State and County elections staffs over 2338 hours. This is the equivalent of 97 days during the 14 months of operation.

It can be assumed that using the toll free line saved Oregon citizens time and money that would have been spent waiting on hold with an elections office to receive service and on long distance phone calls. Efficiency in finding ballot dropsite locations was also improved through using both resources, thus ensuring citizens the opportunity to cast their ballot.

As the toll free line and website gain popularity and exposure, it is expected that the return on investment will continue to grow. Costs attributable to this project are approximately one month in total of staff time to develop the pdf training/reference manual and website and to train the call center representatives, approximately \$12,000 spent on marketing the toll free line, and \$34,822 for operation of the call center this biennium. It is apparent that these new elections resources have already had a huge return on investment and will continue to provide greater return into the future.