



Office of the Washington State Auditor

Pat McCarthy

Performance Audit

Opportunities to Improve King County Elections' Information Technology Security

May 2, 2019

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Scope and methodology	3
Audit Results	5
Recommendations.....	5
Auditor’s Remarks	5
Auditee Response	6
Appendix A: Initiative 900	7

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Provide citizens with independent and transparent examinations of how state and local governments use public funds, and develop strategies that make government more efficient and effective.

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Introduction

Government organizations have become increasingly dependent on computerized information systems to carry out their operations. These systems process, store and share sensitive and confidential information, including personal and financial data, in order to deliver services to residents.

Risks to a local government's information technology (IT) environment go beyond the activities of hackers stealing credit card information or Social Security numbers, or installing malware to disrupt communications. Errors or misuse of the system by employees or contractors can also jeopardize the operation of any entity that relies on computers and networks.

Furthermore, research by Verizon Wireless in its 2018 Data Breach Investigation Report shows that the public sector reported the most cyber security incidents. A 2018 study by the Ponemon Institute found that governments pay an average of \$75 per record lost in a data breach.

To help Washington's local governments protect their IT systems, we are offering them the opportunity to participate in a performance audit designed to assess whether there are opportunities to improve their IT systems.

King County Elections chose to participate in this audit.

Scope and methodology

The performance audit we conducted was designed to answer the following questions:

- Do King County Elections' IT security policies, standards and procedures align with leading practices?
- Has Elections implemented effective IT security practices to protect its information, and are they consistent with leading practices?

Comparing the Elections' IT security program to leading practices

We assessed the Elections' IT security policies, procedures and practices to leading practices in this area to identify any improvements that could make them stronger. We selected leading practices from the Center for Internet Security's Top 20 Critical Security Controls, which were developed by a broad community of private and public sector stakeholders after examining the most common attack patterns. The Top 20 Security Controls are a prioritized list of control areas designed to help organizations with limited resources optimize their security defenses efforts to achieve the highest return on investment.

Evaluating effective implementation of IT security practices

To determine if Elections has implemented effective IT security practices, we conducted tests to determine if controls were implemented properly and functioning effectively.

Additionally, our subject matter experts conducted tests on the Elections' IT infrastructure and, based on their professional experience, ranked the identified weaknesses by the severity and ease in which the identified weakness could be exploited.

We gave management the results of the tests as they were completed, then conducted follow-up testing to determine if they had successfully mitigated the weaknesses we identified.

Next steps

Our performance audits of local government programs and services are reviewed by the local government's legislative body and/or by other committees of the local government whose members wish to consider findings and recommendations on specific topics. Representatives of the State Auditor's Office will review this audit with King County Elections' legislative body in Renton, Washington. The public will have the opportunity to comment at this hearing. Please check King County Elections' website for the exact date, time and location. The State Auditor's Office conducts periodic follow-up evaluations to assess the status of recommendations, and may conduct follow-up audits at its discretion. See **Appendix A**, which addresses the I-900 areas covered in the audit.

Audit Results

The results of our audit work and recommendations were communicated to management of King County Elections for its review, response and action. We found that, while the Elections' IT policies and practices partially align with industry leading practices, there are areas where improvements can be made. King County Elections has already addressed significant issues we identified, and is continuing to make improvements.

Because the public distribution of tests performed and test results could increase the risk to Elections, distribution of this information is kept confidential under RCW 42.56.420(4), and under Generally Accepted Government Auditing Standards, Sections 7.40-43.

Recommendations

To help ensure King County Elections protects its information technology systems and the information contained in those systems, we make the following recommendations:

- Continue remediating identified gaps
- Revise King County Elections' IT security policies and procedures to align more closely with leading practices

Auditor's Remarks

The State Auditor's Office recognizes King County Elections' willingness to volunteer to participate in this audit, demonstrating its dedication to making government work better. It is apparent the Elections' management and staff want to be accountable to the citizens and good stewards of public resources. Throughout the audit, they fostered a positive and professional working relationship with the Washington State Auditor's Office.

Auditee Response



King County

Department of Elections
Julie Wise, Director

vote!

April 15, 2019

Peggy Bodin
Assistant Director of IT Audits
Office of the Washington State Auditor
302 Sid Snyder Ave SW
Olympia, WA 98504-0021

Dear Ms. Bodin:

On behalf of King County Elections, thank you for the opportunity to review and respond to the cyber security performance audit report, "Opportunities to Improve King County Elections' Information Technology Security."

It was a pleasure to work with your office as well as subject matter experts who evaluated Elections' IT security. My team has continually been impressed with the professionalism and collaborative approach taken by your office in our many interactions.

Thank you for recognizing the measures we have already taken to protect our IT systems from numerous threats. We appreciate the efforts of your staff and the subject matter experts who evaluated our IT security program and recommend opportunities for improvement. As your recent testing showed, we have implemented many of the finding recommendations; thereby already strengthening our IT security program. We remain committed to addressing the remaining recommendations in the report and to implementing processes to ensure we remain vigilant.

Sincerely,

Julie Wise
Director
King County Elections

Appendix A: Initiative 900

Initiative 900, approved by Washington voters in 2005 and enacted into state law in 2006, authorized the State Auditor’s Office to conduct independent, comprehensive performance audits of state and local governments.

Specifically, the law directs the Auditor’s Office to “review and analyze the economy, efficiency, and effectiveness of the policies, management, fiscal affairs, and operations of state and local governments, agencies, programs, and accounts.” Performance audits are to be conducted according to U.S. Government Accountability Office government auditing standards.

In addition, the law identifies nine elements that are to be considered within the scope of each performance audit. The State Auditor’s Office evaluates the relevance of all nine elements to each audit. The table below indicates which elements are addressed in the audit. Specific issues are discussed in the Results and Recommendations sections of this report.

I-900 element	Addressed in the audit
1. Identify cost savings	No. The audit did not identify measurable cost savings. However, strengthening IT security could help Elections avoid or mitigate costs associated with a data breach.
2. Identify services that can be reduced or eliminated	No. The audit objectives did not address services that could be reduced or eliminated.
3. Identify programs or services that can be transferred to the private sector	No. The audit objectives were focused on improving Elections’ information system security program.
4. Analyze gaps or overlaps in programs or services and provide recommendations to correct them	Yes. The audit compares Elections’ IT security against leading practices and makes recommendations to align them.
5. Assess feasibility of pooling information technology systems within the department	No. The audit did not assess the feasibility of pooling information systems; it focused on Elections’ IT security posture.
6. Analyze departmental roles and functions, and provide recommendations to change or eliminate them	Yes. The audit evaluated the roles and functions of IT security at Elections and made recommendations to better align them with leading practices.
7. Provide recommendations for statutory or regulatory changes that may be necessary for the department to properly carry out its functions	No. The audit did not identify a need for statutory or regulatory change.
8. Analyze departmental performance, data performance measures, and self-assessment systems	Yes. Our audit examined and made recommendations to improve IT security control performance.
9. Identify relevant best practices	Yes. The audit identified and used leading practices published by the Center for Internet Security to assess Elections’ IT security controls.

Audit performed to standards

We conducted this performance audit under the authority of state law (RCW 43.09.470), approved as Initiative 900 by Washington voters in 2005, and in accordance with Generally Accepted Government Auditing standards (December 2011 revision) issued by the U.S. Government Accountability Office. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.