THE ELECTION Connection

Special Edition

King County Elections gets Lean

**Sherril Huff,
Director of Elections**

King County Elections (KCE) has increased speed in processing both voter registration forms and ballots, thanks to intensive work using the principles of Lean. Lean is a process that focuses on efficiency, streamlining tasks from the beginning of a work flow to its end. Voter Services and Ballot Processing divisions of Elections both completed Lean process improvements in time to prepare for and respond to the 2012 primary and general elections. This was the first presidential election since the department moved entirely to vote-by-mail and management was looking for strategies throughout the organization to prepare for an anticipated record voter turnout. Lean was critical to the department's success in achieving efficiencies while meeting goals for countywide budget reductions.

KCE improves voter registration speed thanks to Lean

Most citizens (about 89%) register to vote either via the Department of Licensing or the state's online voter registration system. But many (almost 11%) either still prefer paper forms or register at voter registration drives where paper is convenient.

During the 2012 Presidential Election, Voter Services' process for handling the increase in paper voter registration forms was stretched to its limits.

Staff participated in a Lean event called a "Kaizen," designed to improve voter registration processing time.

KCE's Voter Services group has successfully cut the time it takes to process voter registration forms and other incoming mail. The accomplishments come after an intense review of the paper voter registration form process. A Lean process helped determine the most accurate and efficient method to process the forms.

The Voter Services Lean event:

- **Reduced turnaround time of voter registration by 43%**
- **Reduced total processing time by nearly 45%**
- **Cut processing time for incoming mail by 54%**

It has been over one year since the event took place and the results have been both positive and sustained.

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Ballot processing speed, efficiency improves with Lean

Given an estimated return of one million ballots in the presidential election, (25% more than ever before returned), the ballot processing work group focused on how to increase processing speed. In March and May of 2012, two separate Kaizen (continuous improvement) events focused on increasing the numbers of ballots processed, decreasing exceptions handling time (processing of ballots with some type of problem, like a missing signature), while providing continued excellence in ballot accountability.

Continuous improvement analysis was already familiar to us. Since 2005, improvement commitments focused on Six Sigma quality control, reducing errors per million, and focusing on zero discrepancies in ballot accountability – a goal achieved and sustained since 2009. Now, the challenge was to take this success and do the work faster, with fewer resources and staff hours, while maintaining zero discrepancies. The following is a summary of two Lean events and their ongoing results.

March 2012 Kaizen

The legislative guidance regarding signature verification and remedy is complex and requires subjective determinations. This results in multiple paths for resolving different problems, each associated with different staff skill sets.

One goal was to reduce the number of signatures challenged by 30%.

Scanning ballots.

KCE reduced the signature challenge rate by 31.9%.

- November 2011 challenge rate was 3.22% of ballots received.
- November 2013 challenge rate was 2.19%.

A second goal was to increase the speed of initial ballot processing, including signature verification and review, by 30 percent.

Lean reduced initial processing time by 27%.

- November 2011 time was 2.29 minutes per ballot.
- November 2013 time was reduced to 1.67 minutes per ballot.

May 2012 Kaizen

The 2012 primary and general election voter turnout was expected to be very large. King County Elections wanted to be fully prepared to manage the high volumes while maintaining the best possible accuracy with greater efficiency.

The goal of the Kaizen was to decrease the time to open a ballot.

The result was a 30% reduction in time to open a ballot.

- November 2011 opening took 0.40 minutes per ballot.
- November 2013 opening took 0.28 minutes.

A reduction in staffing costs per ballot processed as well as increases in the numbers of ballots tabulated during election week show the positive results of continuous process improvement.

KCE increased the number of ballots counted during election week by nearly 18%.

- November 2011, 69% of ballots received had been tabulated.
- November 2013, 84% of ballots received had been tabulated.

KCE reduced the cost per ballot by 21%.

- November 2012 cost per ballot was $1.12.
- November 2013 cost per ballot was $0.88.

Lean and Six Sigma quality control gave the Elections Department tools to use when evaluating voter registration and ballot processing. Working with staff from all parts of the organization – cross-department process leads, quality assurance staff, technical services specialists, with support from leadership – resulted in significant, lasting changes.