

# King County

## Election Procedures Review | 2015 Primary

Issued December 2015

The report does not affect the validity of the outcome of a primary or election or the validity of any canvass of returns (RCW 29A.04.570).



Elections Division

520 Union Ave SE, Olympia, WA 98504-0229

(360) 902-4180

## Table of Contents

Review Process .....	3
County Elections Department Fact Sheet .....	4
Best Practices.....	5
Suggestions for Improvement .....	11
County Elections Department Response .....	13
Synopsis .....	17

## Review Process

The county elections department procedures review process:

- Promotes consistency of election administration statewide.
- Provides feedback to the County Auditor.
- Highlights best practices in our state.

County elections departments are scheduled for review every 5 years.<sup>1</sup>

This review, required by state law, evaluates King County Elections Department procedures and practices. A certified elections administrator from the Elections Division of the Office of the Secretary of State conducted the review.

The reviewer followed a checklist containing 74 election procedures and processes. The election department procedures were reviewed against 77 state statutes, 63 state rules, and 3 federal acts regarding the administration of elections and voter registration. The reviewer observed election practices during the 2015 Primary. Written procedures and county documentation were analyzed for compliance with state laws and rules.

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<sup>1</sup>RCW 29A.04.560, RCW29A.04.570

## County Elections Department Fact Sheet

Election: 2015 Primary

Registered voters: 1,183,771

Ballots returned: 295,181

Percentage of voter turnout: 25

Total ballot deposit sites available: 25

Voting centers: 3

Scheduled mobile van sites available: 12

24-hour deposit sites available: 10

Jurisdictions: 28

Permanent staff: 63

Certified Election Administrators: 29

Seasonal staff: 157

Unique challenges: Large geographic area, high number of jurisdictions and precincts, diverse population densities in urban and rural areas, and a wide range of socioeconomic and cultural influences.

County square miles: 2,307

Incorporated areas: 39

## Best Practices

County elections department activities that improve efficiency, accuracy, and voter services.

### Ballot Drop-off Vans

King County Elections (KCE) deployed 12 mobile deposit sites across the county via “Ballot Drop-off Vans.” The vans were parked in strategic locations with ample signage, and staffed with trained employees to serve voters. In addition to King County’s 10 permanent drop boxes, these temporary sites were open for three days and promoted within the voters’ pamphlet, mail ballot packet materials, and on the department’s website.



Figure 1. Ballot drop-off van



Figure 2. Mobile ballot drop box

### Confirmation Photograph

Once a staffed ballot deposit site was arranged according to the election department’s plan (van, tent, mobile drop box, materials), staff immediately took a picture of the site. This “confirmation photograph” was sent back to the department and reviewed by lead elections staff to assure quality of the location set-up. This quick and simple technique allowed KCE to confirm each mobile site was deployed and ready as planned.

### Voter Services

**Email follow-up.** King County Elections utilized email addresses provided by voters to send helpful reminders throughout the election cycle. For example, the department sent follow-up emails to military and overseas voters reminding them how to access the MOVE Act compliant electronic ballot.

KCE also sent periodic emails to each voter whose ballot signature was missing or challenged. These outreach reminders were sent before the required 3-day calling period (prior to Certification Day) to reduce the number of calls and better serve voters.

**Educational information.** Through coordinated messaging, quick reference cards at voting centers, local celebrity endorsements, and online quizzes such as, “Test your Elections IQ” –

KCE makes education a priority. For example, the online quiz helps voters understand whether or not they're eligible to vote in Washington State. Instructional videos on the website educate voters about voting by mail. Focused public service announcements teach (and entertain) voters about the importance of signing return envelopes. The department's exemplary emphasis on educating voters benefits all voters and counties in our state.

**Counter service.** King County Elections used a dual monitor set-up at its service counter to help voters see important registration and voting information. While the KCE employee viewed the election management system on one side of the counter, the voter could see his or her requested information on the other side of the counter. The employee protected certain pieces of information, answered questions about challenged ballots, and instantly displayed information pertinent to the voter. The dual monitor set-up improved transparency and eliminated the awkward obstacles of an office counter.

King County Elections also provides a year-round public kiosk open to any voter in the state. The public may log in to the voter registration tool, "MyVote" or print a precinct-specific ballot from "MyBallot." For voters registered in other counties, the department prepares pre-printed labels to help voters mail their ballots to the correct county.



Figure 3. Dual monitor set-up

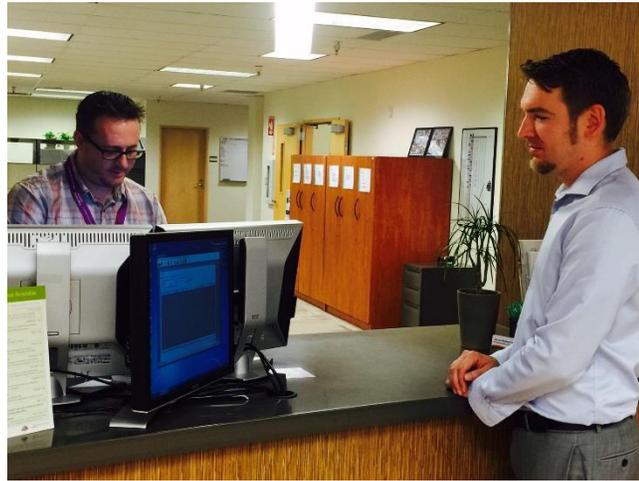


Figure 4. Dual monitor with customer

### Logic & Accuracy Test—Observer Areas

The official Logic & Accuracy Test demonstrated the accuracy of the ballot counting system. King County Elections printed a useful agenda for test day along with a list of additional "Observable Opportunities" for election observers. The department provided an organized area for observers to learn and gather throughout the election, and a second area for the test itself. In particular, a very large computer monitor was set up allowing all observers to view the uploading of electronic results into the state's Washington Election Information System (WEI).

## Second Signature Check—Hands-free Application

When a signature on a returned ballot was questioned by the initial signature checking team, King County Elections referred the ballot to a second team. The second team reviewed the questioned signature before determining whether a notice should be sent to the voter. This “second review” guaranteed that more than one staff person analyzed the signature for acceptance.

KCE also collaborated with its IT department to develop an electronic solution to display signatures needing a second review. The “hands-free” application improved efficiency by allowing accepted ballots to be processed faster, while questioned ballots were flagged and easily researched electronically. This innovation eliminated the cumbersome, manual process of organizing and pulling challenged paper ballots for second review. Finally, the voter services team also had the ability to access the application to immediately answer questions voters had about their questioned ballots.

## Ballot Privacy Sheet

For ballots returned electronically, King County Elections devised a simple ballot privacy sheet that covered vote responses, but also revealed important “office use” information. One corner of the privacy cover sheet was cut at an angle permitting accurate scanning of the necessary quick response (QR) code while keeping all voter marks covered. This useful modification promoted efficiency, but more importantly, it preserved the voter’s privacy throughout the administrative process.



Figure 3. Ballot privacy sheet for electronically returned ballots

## Ballot Processing—Reference Materials

**Teams of two.** King County Elections routinely collects data to improve the efficiency of its process. Through collecting such data, the department learned that opening and inspecting ballots in teams of two is faster and more accurate than individual inspectors working independently. New employees worked with smaller batches, known as “training batches.”

**Opener’s checklist.** The teams of two opening and inspecting ballots documented every action taken on the “Opener’s Checklist.” The list, similar to a “batch slip,” required election workers to write and “check off” each completed step of processing a batch.

**Self-review list.** A laminated list of basic reminders was placed at each ballot processing table. The “10-min Self Review” reminded workers of the important steps to complete before the batch moved to the next step of the process, along with the Opener’s Checklist. This type of self-evaluation by election workers contributes to accuracy.

**Scanning reference card.** A “Quick Reference” list in the ballot tabulation area reminded scanning operators how to operate and troubleshoot the ballot scanning equipment. This emphasis on reference materials for staff reduces confusion and errors.

## **Ballot Processing—Visual Indicators**

King County Elections emphasized visual indicators to help election employees accurately process ballots.

**Pre-paid envelopes.** The department printed visual indicators (codes) on all pre-paid envelopes containing time-sensitive notices for voters. The notices with “like issues” were processed in groups when returned from voters in the mail. Essentially, the code on the envelope helps election workers sort envelopes before opening them, allowing for quicker delivery to the actual team doing the work. This innovation sprouted from a Lean event to improve efficiency and accuracy.

**Color.** The department used color to ensure integrity of the process. For example, trays of ballot envelopes “ready for opening” were easily identified by the color yellow. Trays containing ballots for “special handling” were identified by the color green. Blue trays contained challenged ballots and orange trays contained alternate format ballots.

Another example of color use was observed in the ballot scanning area. After a batch of ballots was scanned through the tabulation system, the department coded the box with a yellow seal to show it was complete and no further work needed. When a batch of ballots was waiting to be scanned, the department coded the box with a blue seal until it was scanned, then a yellow seal was applied. Batches of ballots waiting to be adjudicated had a red seal until scanned and complete, then a yellow seal was applied. The goal was to achieve accuracy through obvious visual indicators.



Figure 4. Color coded trays



Figure 5. Staff prepping ballots for scanning

## Reconciliation

The ballot processing practices described in this section resulted in King County's ability to reconcile ballots received with the numbers accepted and rejected. Given the population density of the county, the department's ability to reconcile ballots is impressive.

Again, collaborating with its IT department and implementing innovations from Lean events, the department developed a dynamic database specifically for reconciliation. The application allows each team to update ballot numbers throughout the day, instead of using one spreadsheet for one employee to enter data at the end of the day. This tool improves the department's ability to troubleshoot throughout the day and reconcile accurately on a daily basis.

Remarkably, King County has reconciled every ballot through 25 consecutive elections.

## Election Day Deposit Site Management—Parking Lots

In addition to parking spaces reserved for voters with accessible needs, King County Elections made a special effort to leave space for increased traffic on Election Day. Bright orange cones with, "Voter Parking Only" signs reserved additional spaces for voters.

To ensure ballot deposit boxes were locked precisely at 8:00 p.m. on Election Night, the department placed an atomic clock on top of each box to clearly display the time for both voters and staff. Clocks, LED lanterns, and bullhorns for announcing the time were used at each site.

Finally, to clearly indicate the last car eligible to deposit a ballot (in the parking lot no later than 8:00 p.m.), a staff person followed the car with a large sign marked, "End of Line." The traffic pattern from the street to the deposit box was also lined with staff and signage.



Figure 7. "End of line" signage



Figure 6. "Voter Parking Only" signage

## Suggestions for Improvement

These suggestions assist the county elections department in implementing state and federal laws and rules.

### Voter Registration

Voters should only be required to provide information necessary to complete the registration application. The multi-purpose **verification notice** provided by King County Elections for the election review indicates voters are asked to supply the five required elements for registration regardless if they provided it the first time. Verification notices should indicate the precise information the voter is required provide.<sup>2</sup>

### Accessible Voting Centers

The arrangement of accessible voting units (AVUs) at three voting centers allowed observers and voters waiting in the center to view ballots displayed on AVU screens. King County Elections anticipated the volume of voters on Election Day and devised accessible pathways to the units. However, the physical arrangement and number of AVUs in each center contributed to privacy issues.

The voting unit's standard privacy screen provides minimal privacy for voters with disabilities. It was still possible to view a voter's choices from different perspectives in each voting center. The elections department needs to provide additional privacy for voters using AVUs to ensure "absolute secrecy" as required by the state constitution.<sup>3</sup>

### Ballot Deposit Sites—Late Ballots

At exactly 8:00 p.m. on Election Day, ballot drop boxes were properly secured to prevent the deposit of additional (late) ballots. After 8:00 p.m., staff provided voters a card containing contact information and an explanation that drop boxes close at 8:00 p.m. KCE also kept its phone bank open to assist voters with questions.

According to county election procedures, staff members closing the sites do not accept late ballots from voters. However, only the County Canvassing Board may determine final rejection or acceptance of late ballots. KCE must accept late ballots when offered by voters, and refer such ballots to the Canvassing Board for rejection.<sup>4</sup>

### Mobile Ballot Deposit Sites

Ballot boxes must be secured at all times with seal logs that document each time the box is opened. A strap around the mobile ballot deposit box does not document nor detect access to

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<sup>2</sup> RCW [29A.08.110](#); [NVRA](#)

<sup>3</sup> RCW [29A.40.160\(4\)](#) - WA Constitution: [ARTICLE 6, SECTION 6](#) - WAC [434-250-105](#)

<sup>4</sup> WAC [434-250-100\(2\)](#)

ballots in the box. The elections department must use uniquely numbered seals and seal logs to detect access until ballots have been removed.<sup>5</sup>

### **Canvassing Board—Open Public Meeting**

All meetings of the County Canvassing Board fall under the rules of the Open Public Meetings Act.<sup>6</sup> King County Elections held its meeting for the public, but it was challenging for observers to hear the discussion of the board members and understand how each member voted. Challenged ballots and voter intent issues were momentarily projected on a wall as a courtesy to observers, but the Board's determinations could not be heard nor seen. The information was not available in the meeting minutes.

King County Elections must ensure that attendees are able to see and hear the determinations made by each member of the Board. It's also necessary for the Board to receive training and take time to refer to the Voter Intent Manual during its discussions, [Voter Intent: Statewide Standards on What is a Vote](#).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> WAC [434-250-100\(2\)](#), WAC [434-261-045](#)

<sup>6</sup> RCW [42.30](#), WAC [434-261-086](#)

<sup>7</sup> RCW [29A.60.140\(1\)](#)

## County Elections Department Response

King County Elections provided this response to the review on December 18, 2015.

### Voter Registration – Verification Notice

Thank you for the clarification on the exact requirements for the verification notice. King County Elections (KCE) will produce and implement a new version of the verification notice that indicates only the precise information the voter is required to provide and no more.

### Accessible Voting Centers

KCE typically operates three Accessible Voting Centers (AVC) during an election, and each location is set-up differently based on the specific facility and forecasted voter turnout rate. In previous years, KCE has set-up "hospital" type screens next to each Accessible Voting Unit (AVU) in an attempt to mitigate privacy concerns. Each AVU would be arranged so that its screen faced a wall. However this arrangement created a dangerous tripping hazard because power cords and machine legs were in the voter's path – even when ADA approved cord covers were used. Positioning our AVU's with their screens facing away from the wall keeps power cords out of the way and allows voters in wheelchairs to access the AVU without having to maneuver around or behind the device. Additionally, privacy screens had legs which caused a more dangerous tripping hazard than power cords. As a result, we have placed the feet of the screens at different angles to minimize exposure without complete success. We will continue to look for solutions to this issue that don't present tripping hazards or accessibility concerns, such as alternative privacy screens and different layouts when setting up the machines.

### Ballot Deposit Sites – Late Ballots

Beginning with the upcoming February election, all of our election night ballot drop locations' closing staff will be supplied with a separate "blue bag" for receipt of any ballots delivered by voters after the 8:00 p.m. deadline. We will continue to communicate with the voters through the use of the "8 pm card" (see below) but staff will be instructed to accept ballots while on location and during closing procedures. Staff will be trained on new procedures that will require ballots returned after 8 p.m. to be deposited into a "blue bag" marked with the site location, date, seal, and staff information for return to our offices for sequestration. Our current closing procedures are as follow:

King County Elections provides a variety of ballot deposit sites for our voters; permanent ballot drop boxes (BDOL's), temporary mobile ballot drop vans (BDOV's), and mobile ballot boxes at our Accessible Voting Centers (AVC's). The Election Day closing process is somewhat unique to each type of site. We provide an "8 pm card" to voters that arrive to our ballot deposit locations after the boxes are closed. This single card, containing our 3 languages, simply states "By law, ballot drop boxes must close at 8 p.m. on Election Night." It also provides the telephone number for our phone bank which operates until 8:30 p.m. and the appropriate statutes.

**Currently:**

At our temporary mobile ballot drop van (BDOV) locations, we provide the “8 pm card” to voters once the temporary ballot box is sealed. KCE staffs main focus at this time is to correctly pack their ballot boxes and supplies, break down their location, and return to our office. During this time, while they are providing the card to any late arriving voters, they also verbally communicate that the deadline to vote has passed and that the ballot box is now sealed. While staff do dissuade voters from leaving ballots after closing (as the boxes are sealed); they will accept ballots from any voter that is firm on their request to leave them.

At our permanent ballot deposit (BDOL) sites, the staff also provide “8 pm card” to voters once the 8:00 p.m. deadline has passed. However, our permanent boxes are affixed with magnetic ballot box closure signage but the slots remain unsealed and; after end-of-line is established, late arriving voters can continue to deposit their ballots if they choose, as on-time ballots received before 8:00 pm have already been secured.

In all types of locations, we endeavor to balance an opportunity for communication and education with the voters that arrive after 8:00 p.m. with an efficient, timely, and safe election night closing procedure.

All ballots that are received at deposit sites after 8:00 p.m. on election night and/or the following days are referred to the Canvass Board for rejection. Once rejected, we send each voter a letter. A sample letter is attached at the end of this item.

**Sample letter:**

November 13, 2015

JOHN VOTER  
2621 NW 57TH ST # B  
SEATTLE, WA 98107

Dear Voter,

Election officials were stationed at each of the County's ballot drop-off locations at 8:00 p.m. on Election Day. All on-time ballots were collected and returned to our office for processing. Your November 3, 2015 General Election ballot was not returned before the 8:00 p.m. deadline. Consequently, your ballot was rejected by the King County Canvassing Board and will not be counted.

In future elections, please be advised that all ballot drop-off locations, by law, are closed promptly at 8:00 p.m. on Election Day. Please refer to the Local Voters' Pamphlet, visit our web-site at <http://www.kingcounty.gov/elections> or call our office at 206-296-VOTE for the locations, dates and hours of King County's ballot drop-off locations.

Sincerely,



Sherril Huff, Director  
Department of Elections

**Mobile Ballot Deposit Sites**

After review of the preliminary draft and discussions; both internal and with the OSOS, KCE has a better understanding of the WACs as they pertain to ballot deposit sites and clarity as to the difference between requirements for ballot boxes at mobile deposit sites and requirements for ballot transport. For the upcoming election, KCE will:

- have sourced a variety of appropriate seals and will procure a supply for use on our current ballot boxes in use at the mobile locations
- create or modify a seal log for use at our mobile locations that will document the date, location, uniquely numbered tamper evident seal numbers, staff custody, and disposition of each mobile ballot box
- create or modify procedures to address the additional measures

Additionally, we will continue to research alternatives to current mobile ballot boxes as we look toward the increasing use of our ballot drop locations and expanding services to voters.

## Canvassing Board – Open Public Meeting

Since receiving this feedback, King County Elections has implemented several improvements to Canvassing Board meetings including:

- Use of microphones
- Two projected displays instead of one
- The presenter is now vocalizing the control number for each item as well as repeating the final determination after the Board makes a decision – this information will be included in the audio recording of the meetings
- The presenter is now taking detailed notes on the canvass board log as to the final disposition for each item
- The Canvassing Board will receive annual Voter Intent training and will refer to the Voter Intent Manual as needed



## Synopsis

During the review, 74 election procedures and processes were examined. The county elections department procedures were reviewed against 77 state statutes, 63 state rules, and 3 federal acts regarding the administration of elections and voter registration. The reviewers observed election practices during the 2015 Primary.

The reviewers identified areas of best practices:

- Ballot Drop-off Vans
- Confirmation Photograph
- Voter Services
- Logic & Accuracy Test—Observer Areas
- Second Signature Check—Hands-free Application
- Ballot Privacy Sheet
- Ballot Processing—Reference Materials
- Ballot Processing—Visual Indicators
- Reconciliation
- Election Day Deposit Site Management—Parking Lot

The report suggests improvement in the following areas:

- Voter Registration
- Accessible Voting Centers
- Ballot Deposit Sites—Late Ballots
- Mobile Ballot Deposit Sites
- Canvassing Board—Open Public Meeting

The response of the King County Elections Department and County Canvassing Board addresses compliance with state and federal laws to ensure accessible, fair, and accurate elections.

The report does not affect the validity of the outcome of a primary or election or the validity of any canvass of returns. The election reviewer does not have jurisdiction to make such an evaluation, finding, or recommendation under this title. (RCW 29A.04.570).