

## Not So Benign: The Neglect of Detroit Elections by the Secretary of State

Detroit's November 8, 2005, election problems reflected chronic negligence by the Michigan Secretary of State. Behind all the headlines about bungled votes, hand counts, and recounts, there is another story. It is about ongoing neglect of duty by a Republican statewide office holder, with the result that growing distrust of the election system could suppress voter turnout in the state's biggest Democratic stronghold.

When election workers don't understand the proper way to handle ballots and optical scan memory cards, even taking them home, it is obvious they have not received effective training. When the election cannot even be recounted because no one maintained the proper chain of custody of election materials, there is clearly a need for the polling precinct team to have rehearsed these critical procedures ahead of time. When a city election administrator is reported to say that the department had difficulty "getting competent poll workers" for 720 precincts, there is definitely a systemic problem that needs to be addressed. And when anyone in Michigan naively plans to send unencrypted election results over modem connections, we are risking a vote-tampering mess.

These matters are ultimately the responsibility of the Secretary of State. This elected official is mandated by state law to design and disseminate effective training for election administrators, staff, poll workers, and technicians. The current training offered by the SOS consists of a 59-minute videotape and a set of powerpoint slides. Election workers are certified by attending one boring training every two years. Even election administrators can receive accreditation by snoozing through a lecture, and filling out an open book test. Imagine you are a new election inspector, arriving at a polling place at 6 a.m., to work a complex 16 hour day with a group of people you may have never met, many of whom are also new, and all you've had for training is a lecture with no hands-on practice.

By October of 2006, the Secretary of State will have received \$78 million in federal funds under the 2002 Help America Vote Act. Congress intended that poll worker education be improved under this grant program. Unfortunately, in the SOS' 69-page HAVA State Plan, there is exactly one sentence on the subject: "Develop election official and poll worker training initiatives." No further details are supplied for the use of the \$5.8 million budgeted in the plan for "Voter education, election official education, and poll worker training." In the Plan's performance measures, there is mention of measuring the recruitment of new election inspectors. Unfortunately, there is nothing anywhere in the Plan that proposes a needs assessment, identifies problems in recruitment, or suggests solutions.

Detroit is by no means the only Michigan jurisdiction with problems in recruiting and training competent election workers. Economic pressures on families have made it much more difficult for even the most civic-minded citizens to skip a work day in order to staff the polls. Retirement-age people are working longer to make ends meet, so the traditional pool of election help is shrinking. Current laws, some just enacted, lock the election system into an obsolete paradigm: elections must take place on a Tuesday and election inspectors can only work in their own county. Increasingly complicated election laws and requirements have driven many experienced election administrators and workers to resign—a rational response when an error-

prone process offers mostly opportunity for criticism and public humiliation, while an election well run earns no notice, let alone praise.

It is time that the Secretary of State provided positive leadership in this crisis of election staffing and quality control. It is time to stop neglecting the voters in Detroit and in other Michigan communities, allowing predictable election trouble to take place, and then swooping down with orders and punitive condemnation.

Jan BenDor

June Rusten

Jeff Souza

Members of the Washtenaw County Voter Protection Committee