

NASS Award submission

2025: Office of the Ohio Secretary of State, Ready for November Program

COVER PAGE:

The Office of the Ohio Secretary of State is nominating Hon. Secretary Frank LaRose for the implementation, support, and success of the Ready for November program.

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Brief description of the project:

The Ready for November program was established over a year prior to the 2024 general election with the intent of building a project management approach to election security and readiness efforts that could be road-mapped and implemented for all elections. This program includes an established training and exercise schedule for boards of elections and Ohio Secretary of State staff, an in-depth internal readiness assessment, a comprehensive BOE readiness assessment, threat and hazard identification assessments and mitigating actions, a continuity of operations program, documented process and procedures for elections processes, an incident response plan, a command center setup for election day operations, and an extensive After Action Review (AAR) program. This program was successfully designed and implemented so elections administration can be executed with excellence, integrity and accountability. That work includes well-established plans to mitigate and resolve disruptions that may occur.

General subject area of nomination: Elections

II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Summary of the project/program

History

When Secretary LaRose took office in 2019, he immediately began developing and implementing best practices to increase readiness and preparedness throughout the office. In Spring of 2020, the Secretary stood up a Ready for November task force focused on preparing county boards of elections to administer a safe, secure, and accessible election with state support, while following COVID restriction guidelines. The task force was a success and evolved into a leadership-driven Ready for November program. After conducting a gap analysis and readiness tabletop exercise in January of 2024, hosted by an Ohio public safety expert, the Secretary hired a full-time Operational Readiness Manager to lead the Ready for November program, underscoring his commitment to readiness efforts and ensuring potential disruptions are planned for and mitigated against to protect Ohio's elections.

However, the goal of the Ready for November program extends beyond mitigating disruptions. The program incorporated a whole community approach to readiness through engagement with boards of elections, county sheriff's offices, county prosecutors, county emergency management agencies, utility providers, the Ohio Jewish Federation, and many others. Engaging the entire Office of the Secretary of State, providing readiness assessments both internally and for local boards, creating custom training plans and custom exercises for the office and boards of elections, and conducting regional readiness seminars and webinars were all critical components to ready the state for the 2024 general election.

Significance

The Ready for November program not only paved a path forward for Ohio's elections, but also created a roadmap that could be used nationally for all states to conduct training and readiness activities for any

future election. The program used existing resources and included subject matter experts from within the Secretary's Office, while capitalizing on the long-tenured local elections officials in Ohio to share their experience and best practices with other, newer elections officials throughout the state. This occurred through Ohio's Regional Readiness Workshops and Webinars, mentorship programs between counties, and at the Secretary of State's Annual Conference. Experienced local elections officials also joined panels with their sheriff's offices and county emergency management agencies to show strength in partnerships and planning in coordination with the Secretary's office for a holistic approach to information sharing and learning.

In Ohio, the Secretary of State oversees the elections process and appoints local board members in each of Ohio's 88 counties. The Secretary of State supervises the administration of election laws; trains election officials and works with counties to train poll workers.

To remain a cost-effective program, the Ready for November program was linked to the Deputy Director of Operations' strategic goal of improving processes within the office to support boards of elections. This overlapping process allowed the Deputy Director to conduct five LeanOhio (six sigma) courses for Ohio Secretary of State's staff which led to 140 process improvements throughout the office including documenting processes for elections administration, organization and improvement of continuity of operations, and migration of unorganized process into a structure on a SharePoint platform, increasing collaboration.

The trainings and regional readiness programs were staffed by the Secretary's communications, external affairs, regional liaison, elections, and public integrity teams to create a cross section of experience. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency's (CISA) Election Security Advisor and Protection Security Advisors, the U.S. Attorney's Office representative from Northern District of Ohio, and the Federal Bureau of Investigations Elections Crime Coordinator joined Ohio SOS staff at the regional readiness seminars to share resources with boards of elections. Each regional readiness seminar concluded with a tabletop exercise specifically designed for the participants to walk through a series of realistic potential disruptions on election day to ensure they were Ready for November.

Program Structure

Ready for November encompassed thirteen specific components that collaboratively created a readiness program that left no stone unturned, no opportunity for someone to miss anything, and no deniability for readiness.

1. Internal readiness assessment

- a. An internal readiness matrix was established to conduct a comprehensive review of the Office's readiness efforts. This was significantly in conjunction with the Deputy Director of Operations and both teams worked together to identify common themes that needed addressed, as well as an in-depth review of areas for improvement within each division. This type of review is often shied away from for fear of exposing gaps within one's own organization. However, Secretary LaRose was steadfast in assuring staff that no organization gets better without identifying gaps and closing them before game day. His experience as a Green Beret reinforced the continuous improvement mentality and established the culture of readiness needed for success.

2. External readiness assessment

- a. The regional operations team conducted a comprehensive readiness assessment of all 88 boards by using a methodological approach to evaluating each board. With assessment definitions, the staff reviewed each of the following areas: Staff, Leadership, Ballot Prep/Proofing, Office/EVC/Warehouse, Accessibility/ADA, PEO Recruitment/Training, Communications, External Technology/Equipment, Physical Security, Cyber Security, Early and Absentee Voting, Budget, and Vendor relationships.

3. Backup and Priority Communications

- a. The Ready for November program put an emphasis on mitigating disruptions to the election process. The Office put a three-prong approach on backup communications including expanding the use of the DHS Wireless Priority Service and Government Electronic Telecommunication System from seven staff to thirty staff, to include regional staff, cyber defense team, and elections admin team. Second, the Office increased the number of AT&T FirstNet phones for organizational leaders to ensure that, in the event of network congestion, communication within the office and with select partners could continue uninterrupted. To ensure backup communication with boards of elections, the Office invested in the procurement and deployment of MARCS radios to all 88 boards of elections. These radios are part of the statewide network used by state and local agencies for public health and safety. These backups are tested in the weeks leading up to elections.
- b. Additionally, the office uses a mass notification system designed to share immediate messaging to large groups statewide, including Ohio SOS staff and Ohio's boards of elections staff. This system was updated and tested multiple times prior to the election.

4. After Action Review (AAR)

- a. As part of the Secretary's dedication to continuous improvement and Ready for November program, a rigorous After-Action Review program was implemented. This included customized hot wash boards so that each elections day operations area could track their strengths and areas for improvement to be used for their hot wash and after-action review.
- b. The After-Action Review program also includes reviewing all pending corrective actions internally before the election by reviewing the aggregate AAR accountability and assignment tracker and sending highlights for election day operations to ensure improvement from previous elections.
- c. To support county boards of elections' continuous improvement, the office took a four-part approach to after action reviews.
 - i. An AAR how-to session was conducted at the 2024 Annual Conference as part of the Ready for November theme to ensure that all 88 county boards of elections were ready and prepared to implement and or improve their own AAR program.
 - ii. Reminders on the importance of AAR and a quick how-to reference are sent to the boards before and after election day.
 - iii. Additionally, the Elections Division's director calls counties identified to receive AAR letters from the office for known issues that require resolution. This call is followed up with a formal AAR letter.
 - iv. Official vendors also received a readiness overview request letter prior the general election and will receive AAR letters after the election in the event there were areas for improvement identified.

5. Election Day Operations (EDO)

- a. A week prior to election day, the entire EDO Command Center was established like an emergency operations center. This consists of a formal command center for leadership to execute command and coordination missions, a Public Integrity Center with safety and security staff, investigations team, an analyst, a CISA Security Advisor, and a liaison from Ohio EMA. The Rapid Response Center was established as a comprehensive news media and social media monitoring center. The election night reporting center was organized for proofing and reviewing the election night results and immediate communication with the county boards of elections. This entire setup is known as the Election Day Operations Command Center with the goal of successfully sharing information, responding to issues, maintaining coordination with partners, and supporting boards of elections.

6. Continuity of Operations

- a. As part of the responsibility of the newly created Operational Readiness Manager, a formal continuity of operations program was developed as part of Ready for November initiative. This COOP program included a formal COOP plan, COOP mission essential functions for all divisions (with specific focus on continuity surrounding the election), job descriptions were written for all election day operations positions in the command center and election night reporting to ensure continuity based on positions and not people's institutional knowledge, a full process review and planning for off-line election night reporting, and a full scale COOP exercise where an actual Mock Election was hosted at the primary continuity site to ensure that the full command center and ENR could operate without flaw – the exercise was a great success. Planning meetings, walkthroughs, and capability were also conducted at the tertiary COOP location to ensure operability.

7. Exercise program

- a. The Secretary's office conducted a total of 14 exercises in calendar year 2024 leading up to the November 5, 2024, general election. These exercises were designed for both internal SOS staff and BOEs continuous improvement. Topics included disinformation and media briefings, CISA's TTX the vote (planning team member), a CISA Physical Security TTX, regional readiness TTXs, a "What If" TTX focused on a scenario to identify potential disruptions, and an internal threats and hazards workshop.

8. Regional Readiness Seminars and Webinars

- a. In spring of 2024, the SOS Ready for November team hosted a series of six Ready for November Regional Readiness Seminars which included a TTX for all 88 boards hosted in the regions throughout the state.
 - i. In the fall, the Ready for November Regional Readiness series continued with a series of webinars which consisted of SOS and seasoned BOE Directors presenting on topics including board challenges, early vote center traffic and line management, election security, PEO TTT, logistics, and ended the series with a stakeholder webinar designed to share the efforts of the secretary's office and BOEs without partners and associations throughout the state including local PD, state partners, prosecutors, mayors alliance, county EMAs, and more.

9. Ohio Polling Location GIS Map Project

- a. The SOS partnered with EMA and OGRIP to develop a GIS map with all 3,200 polling locations on a password protected interactive GIS map that was shared with or all EMAs, BOEs, sheriffs, and state EOC partners. The map included overlays with traffic maps, power outage maps, and weather. This proved immensely helpful during election day operations.

10. USPS and Ohio SOS weekly calls

- a. Starting three weeks prior to the general election and through the weeks following election day, the USPS Customer Relations Managers in Ohio Districts set up twice weekly calls with SOS and BOEs as a sharing platform for updates and any grievances or issues. A Friday call with USPS and SOS was also conducted to ensure that all postal needs were addressed and there were no interruptions to mail-in ballots or other postal concerns.

11. Partnerships and Election Security Briefing Schedule

- a. The Ohio SOS team actively participates with homeland security, emergency management, and other partners that help protect critical infrastructure throughout the state. As part of the Ready for November program, our office conducted a series of Election Security and Readiness briefs to a variety of partners including, but not limited to, the Ohio Homeland Security Advisory Council, the Ohio Homeland Security Classified and Unclassified briefings, the state emergency operations centers stakeholders, the Ohio Emergency Management Agency's local EMA coordination calls, the Ohio Jewish Federation security directors, local boards' first responder planning meetings, and more.

We successfully shared why Ohio's elections are secure and what to expect leading up to election day to ensure that nothing could disrupt Ohio's elections.

12. Readiness Directives

- a. To ensure that boards are following the best practices to ensure readiness, security, continuity, and cyber security, the Secretary issued both a readiness directive and a security directive that specifically outlined a series of requirements for boards to be prepared for the November election. This included poll worker recruitment standards, ballot printing, security elements, and more. The Elections Divisions and IT Division's Project Manager tracked compliance and completion of over a hundred readiness tasks for boards to complete.

13. Election administration plan (EAP)

- a. All 88 boards are required to update their EAP 60 days before an election period. The SOS office updated the template in spring 2024 as part of Ready for November to include 16 updates regarding potential voting disruptions, communication planning, contingency and continuity planning and more.
- b. All 88 plans that were submitted were reviewed against a compliance matrix to ensure that no template was submitted without up-to-date relevant information.

Impacts/Results

The overall impact of the Ready for November program was proven through the impact and efficacy of the general election operations. According to the National Institute of Building Science and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), a dollar invested in mitigation typically saves approximately \$6 in response and recovery efforts. The same mindset and approach were taken with Ready for November. While the true dollar amount cannot be measured, the amount of effort to ensure boards of elections and the SOS office were ready for November was proven in the outcome of the election administration process. Many SOS staff reported that after participating in the Mock COOP exercise that they felt better than they ever had for an election. Turnover also reduced during the Ready for November program, with some staff eligible for retirement or accepting promotions outside of the office agreeing to postpone until after the election. This shows great patriotism and selflessness on their part, but they also reported that the program was so effective they wanted to be a part of the success through the election.

The Ready for November program also saw administrative and programmatic benefits throughout the office and state that were not originally planned. Post-Ready for November, a new Training Unit is being implemented under Operational Readiness to further the existing training requirements and offer more organized and readiness-mindset trainings for staff and boards. Additionally, thanks to the bi-weekly project management meetings and use of new project management approach to the program, the same structure is being applied to other programs and has even grown organically from other sections who said they saw the benefit from Ready for November and implemented in their own division. The use of the Teams Planner application created an environment of ownership.

The Ready for November program is being expanded and documented to ensure that the same structure is applied to all elections to ensure that Ohio is Ready to maintain our gold standard for all future elections.

Through increased trainings and exercises, updating plans, sharing best practices, and understanding potential disruptions, the boards of elections worked tirelessly to ensure that every voter in Ohio had access to a safe and fair election. Our state partners reported feeling more empowered by knowing their local partners and how to support. Our staff adopted a mindset of collaboration, efficiency, accountability and deadline-driven results. The resulting operation proved that Ohio, was in fact, ready for November.

III. SUPPORTING MATERIALS:

<https://www.ohiosos.gov/legislation-and-ballot-issues/ready-for-november-task-force/>

<https://www.ohiosos.gov/readyfornovember/>

<https://www.ohiosos.gov/media-center/press-releases/2024/2024-04-18/>

<https://dayton247now.com/news/local/ohios-ready-for-november-initiative-prepares-for-smooth-election>