

City of Flint, Michigan
Safe Voting Plan Application

To Center for Technology and Civic Life

Mayor Sheldon Neeley, the City Council and City Clerk Inez Brown are working collaboratively on the November 2020 election to: reduce the risk of exposure to coronavirus for our residents as well as our election staff and poll workers; identify best practices for safe and healthy voting; innovate to efficiently and effectively educate our residents about how to exercise their right to vote during this time of COVID-19; be intentional and strategic in helping historically disenfranchised residents and communities safely vote during unprecedented times; and, above all, ensure the right to healthy voting in our dense and diverse communities.

Michigan 2020 Election Administration Climate

Michigan municipalities are faced with conducting two expensive elections in November. First, Michigan election law requires every precinct to be open on election day for in-person voting regardless of the number of voters who cast ballots by mail. Staffing Flint’s 61 precincts has historically been the largest election expense. Second, the expected skyrocketing volume of mail ballots driven by the COVID-19 pandemic will incur costs for staffing and equipment that will rival typical election day expenses.

Michigan election officials typically conduct presidential elections with 25 – 30% of the voters casting ballots by mail and 70 – 75% casting them in-person on election day. It now appears that mail balloting may account for 65 – 70% of the turnout. This trend is breaking municipal election budgets beginning with the higher-than-expected mail turnout in the August Primary that will continue through the November General Election.

Federal CARES ACT funding does not begin to meet the need of cash-strapped municipal election budgets. These funds disbursed by the Secretary of State have been used to issue August Primary mail ballot applications to all voters and to provide PPE and equipment to election officials. Both Flint and Michigan’s budgets have been hard hit by the resulting economic downturn making additional funding of the city’s election preparations unlikely.

There are many challenges to opening polling places in a pandemic and processing a historically high volume of mail ballots. The time that remains between now and the November Election provides an opportunity to plan for the highest possible voter turnouts in the safest possible ways.

Supplemental Election Administration Needs for 2020

Through careful analysis, we have concluded that crucial, supplemental programs will assist Flint voters in fully participating in the presidential election. We are requesting a **\$475,625** grant to meet Flint’s election administration needs for the remainder of this year as specified in the four strategic recommendations.

Recommendation I: Encourage and Increase Absentee Voting (By Mail and Early, In-Person)

1. Provide assistance to help voters safely request absentee ballots.
2. Expand in-person early voting opportunities.

3. Utilize secure drop-boxes to facilitate return of absentee ballots.
4. Deploy additional technology and resources to expedite and improve accuracy of mail ballot process

Recommendation II: Ensure Safe Election Day Voting

Recommendation III: Expand Strategic Voter Education & Outreach Efforts

Recommendation IV: Launch Poll Worker Recruitment & Training.

Recommendation I: Encourage and Increase Absentee Voting (By Mail and Early, In-Person)

Overview of Mail Voting in Michigan

In 2018 Michigan voters amended the state constitution to provide a series of voting rights to Michigan citizens. Central to the amendment is no reason absentee voting, which is a significant change that eliminated the reasons that entitled a voter to vote absentee. Voters must still apply by application to receive an absentee ballot and they may request both a primary ballot and a general election ballot with a single request, which is commonly referred to as a 'dual' application. Further, the amendment entitles citizens who are not registered by the 15th day before the election to register in-person in a clerk's office during the 14 days prior to an election and on election day – Michigan now has Election Day Registration.

Under the amendment election officials have authority to add satellite offices to register voters and issue absentee ballots. The legislative body of the jurisdiction must approve any satellite office under Michigan election law. All satellite offices must be published at least 30 days before an election.

Historically, absentee voting has been costly as clerks must send applications to voters, receive and verify the completed applications, issue and mail absentee ballots, receive voted ballots and verify the voters' signatures, and finally tabulate ballots beginning on election day. Each of these processes must still be done under mail balloting, requiring a significant number of staff and, as the volume increases, more sophisticated equipment to efficiently process the large amount of paperwork.

The back and forth nature of Michigan's mail balloting processes places a heavy burden on voters to learn how to apply for a mail ballot, be aware of the election calendar and apply for a ballot early enough to receive, vote and return the ballot by election day and understand the delays built into the United State Postal Service delivery timelines.

In the 2016 November Presidential Election, Flint received 5,533 mail ballots (16% of total vote). Projections are that between 22,000 and 26,900 mail ballots will be received in November. In fact, Flint exceeded the 2016 General Election total of mail ballots in the August primary this year.

To avoid the city clerk's office being inundated with applications to the point of compromising the processing of applications and ballots, we require the grant resources to facilitate our proposals outlined below.

Flint will assist as many residents as possible with casting ballots before Election Day, serving as the great opportunity to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in our community. We have identified four distinct strategies to help voters overcome barriers to successful mail voting.

1. Provide assistance to voters with mail ballot requests

Directly mail applications to active file Flint voters who did not request a dual application in the August primary. This is the best way to start the mail balloting process for voters who did not return a 'dual' application in the primary. Placing an application in the hands of voters early in the process results in earlier filing of the applications for a mail election. Those voters who did submit a dual application with automatically receive a ballot for the General Election. Printing cost \$2,500; mailing cost \$4,700; and return postage cost \$4,700: total **\$11,900**.

Subtotal: \$11,900

2. Expand in-person early mail voting opportunities

The city clerk's office will issue and receive mail ballots. In the three weeks before the election, the city council chamber will be used to issue and receive mail ballots. Eight election day workers will staff this along with city staff: **\$14,400**.

To encourage Flint voters to hand-deliver their ballots, the clerk is opening four offices in voting locations around the city for three weeks before the election to take voters' mail ballots. The staff of these offices will have applications for mail ballots and will accept voted ballots: **\$8,640**.

The clerk receives many requests from voters to retrieve ballots as they are unable to return ballots under other legal means: **\$13,500**.

Subtotal: \$36,540

3. Utilize secure drop-boxes to facilitate return of absentee

Flint voters, like those across Michigan, will be encouraged to return their mail ballots in-person rather than using USPS, particularly in the last two weeks before the election. USPS is going to be stressed with increased election related mail, as evidenced by recent announcements that some service deterioration is going to occur. Drop boxes, especially drive through boxes, allow voters to easily drop off their voted ballots regardless of where they happen to be in the city.

The clerk has two drop boxes at city office building – one in front and another in back. Four drop boxes will be installed at four fire stations and four will be installed at four voting locations. Eight drop boxes, surveillance camera and installation: **\$48,000**.

An added security measure is staff time to collect ballots from the boxes each day: **\$3,000**.

Subtotal: \$51,000

4. Deploy additional technology and resources to expedite and improve accuracy of mail ballot process

Currently, the city is using the clerk's office downtown to take mail ballot applications, issue mail applications and receive voted mail ballots and answer questions from voters. There is a need for 17 additional temporary employees at \$15 per hour for 32 hours for 6 weeks: **\$48,960**. Flint requires assistance in preparing ballots to be mailed and mailing them to voters. A separate unit of eight staff plus one manager is necessary for seven weeks to pack ballots, secrecy sleeves, and return ballot envelopes into outgoing envelopes: **\$39,760**. Another major city has found that vendor packing some of the materials in the secrecy sleeve in advance increase efficiency of getting ballots turned around: **\$13,000**.

The expected increased volume of mail ballots requires additional counting board staff on election day and any necessary additional days to complete tabulation. It is necessary to bring 40 additional inspectors on handle the volume for 2 shifts: **\$16,000**.

With a large increase in mail ballots, the city requires a commensurate increase in tabulation capacity to complete the count in a reasonable time after the polls close on November 3. Flint has the Hart InterCivic voting system and is improving their mail counting process by purchasing a high-speed tabulator, Verity Central Scanner \$72,000 minus Department of State grant of \$30,000: **\$42,000**. One additional client and scanner and B-drives: **\$30,050**. Three days of training and election day support: **\$10,000**.

Given the unprecedented volume of mail ballots, consulting services can be of enormous value to assist the clerk's office make procedural alterations necessary to process this volume within the limited timeframe between late September and the November 3 election. Critical periods are 1. Late September issuing ballots to voters who submitted dual applications prior to August primary and 2. October timely reviewing and approving applications and getting ballots out before recommended mailing deadlines. There objective is allocate staff between mail and election day efforts, bring on new staff and apply technology to accomplish be successful in these two critical time periods: **\$30,000**.

Subtotal: \$229,770

Recommendation II: Ensure Safe Election Day Voting

Election day workers who administer elections in the 61 precincts are often referred to as the frontline or face of democracy. These workers are asked to work a very long day for a small stipend. They are often referred to as volunteers. This year they face the hazard of COVID-19 as they serve hundreds of voters throughout the day. The average age of our poll workers is in the late 60s or early 70s, an age group considered at high risk to the virus. Flint is having a similar experience as communities across the nation of large numbers of our older workers declining to work this election year. And yet the City of

Flint is committed to opening the same number precincts on election day that the city has opened in recent years. To meet that commitment, the city must enhance its recruitment and retention strategy, including by seeking workers who have not served as poll workers in the past by offering a financial incentive.

The city will hire 450 poll workers to work in the precincts and the mail ballot counting board. A \$100 per worker incentive would be helpful in retaining workers and recruiting new workers: **\$45,000.**

PPE and additional supplies to prevent the spread of COVID-19 are necessary for November. The Department of State is providing a portion of the needs. Election day workers need plexiglass screen between them and voters: **\$15,000.**

The city is responsible for sanitizing private buildings used as polling places right after the election: **\$3,000.**

Subtotal: \$63,000

Recommendation III: Expand Strategic Voter Education & Outreach Efforts.

As noted above, the voters play a critical role to a successfully administered election in November. By applying early for mail ballots, voters will distribute the city clerk's workload across September and October. Normally, voters wait until early to mid-October to apply for a mail ballot, which jams up the process as applications flood the clerk's office, resulting in longer turnaround times before ballots are issued. To avoid this, voters will be encouraged through a variety of outreach to apply early and vote early.

The city's voter outreach and education plans encourage mail balloting utilizing earned media, paid print media, and messaging through social media. The effort will also inform voters of the drop box locations and locations where mail ballots may be dropped off and important steps to ensure their ballots will be counted. The clerk is planning to order 800 banners encouraging voting to be placed around the community. The clerk is working with many public interest organization and neighborhood groups to promote turnout by mail: **\$30,000.**

Voters also must be informed to avoid errors such as forgetting to sign applications and return ballot envelopes and to affix their signatures as they appear on their driver license or state ID. Many people today sign credit card receipts with an informal signature that does not match their formal signature used on official documents. These errors will invalidate ballots. Department of Elections staff will attempt to contact voters making these errors; however, time is usually in short supply. Mailing postcards shortly after ballots are issued will inform voters of this essential information to avoid voiding the ballot. Well-designed postcards will carry these messages. Design, printing and mailing: **\$12,415.**

The pandemic has strained the clerk's postage budget. Communicating with voters via USPS: **\$10,000.**

Subtotal \$52,415

Recommendation IV: Launch Poll Worker Recruitment & Training

There is a need for 30 back-up e-pollbook precinct inspectors to step in if assigned workers do not report for work. **\$6,000.**

Ongoing training is essential to having inspectors moving voters through the process, especially new election day inspectors and absent voter counting board inspectors: **\$25,000.**

Subtotal: \$31,000

TOTAL REQUESTED RESOURCES: \$475,625.