Wisconsin Elections Commission

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DATE: August 24, 2021

TO: Wisconsin Municipal Clerks
             City of Milwaukee Election Commission
             Wisconsin County Clerks
             Milwaukee County Election Commission

FROM: Meagan Wolfe, Administrator

SUBJECT: Elections Security: Trusted Email Address Information

1. **Purpose.** This memorandum provides information how and why to obtain a trusted wi.gov or .gov email address. The Wisconsin Elections Commission and U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency have created an updated way for local governments to obtain either a wi.gov or .gov email address. This is a low-cost and simple way to enhance security for you and your valued residents.

2. **Recommendation.** WEC staff recommends that all Wisconsin counties and municipalities establish an official email address through one of the government's regulated Domain Name Systems (DNS). These domains end in **.gov** and can only be obtained by U.S.-based government organizations. Using one of these domains reduces cyber security risks to both the jurisdiction and Wisconsin citizens.

In 2022 the WEC will begin implementation of new policies to restrict official communications with unofficial email domains, particularly for WisVote users. **All WisVote users will eventually be required to have a .gov domain for official email communications.** There is not yet a set date for this change, however the WEC encourages all Wisconsin jurisdictions to act soon to acquire a .gov domain.

3. **Background.** We all use email in our official communications. Some municipalities currently allow their clerks to use personal email accounts for official communications or to create shared accounts through free email providers. While these techniques are simple and inexpensive, they are not risk free.

Free email providers have access to the contents of your messages and often have no restrictions on the use or sale of your personal data. Free providers also allow anyone to create an account and use any

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name they choose. These shortcomings allow email providers to sell your data for targeted advertising and email spoofing.

Email spoofing is when an email address is created that looks similar to an official email address or can trick a user into believing it is an authentic email address. When attackers are able to spoof emails of government officials the public may be more likely to fall for scams and/or distrust official communications.

For example, it is impossible to tell which of the email addresses below is authentic:

> Actual Email Address: clerkfrmtownsmith@gmail.com
> Example #1 of Spoofed Email Address: clerkfromtownsmith@gmail.com
> Example #2 of Spoofed Email Address: clerkfrmtownsmtih@gmail.com
> Example #3 of Spoofed Email Address: officialtownofsmith@gmail.com

Even the use of a custom domain name, such as townofsmith.com, does not prevent spoofing. This is because **anyone** can obtain a .com or .us domain. Only the .gov domain is restricted to official U.S. government agencies.

For example, it is impossible to tell which one of these addresses below is authentic.

> Actual Email Address: clerk@townofsmith.wi.us
> Example #1 of Spoofed Email Address: clerk@townofsmith.com
> Example #2 of Spoofed Email Address: clerk@smithwi.us
> Example #3 of Spoofed Email Address: clerk@smithwi.com

Because of the risks described above, a growing number of government agencies will only conduct business through email with another .gov account. Anything else is simply too easy to spoof.

4. **How To.** Instructions how to obtain a .gov domain are attached to this communication as *Appendix A: How to Obtain a .gov Domain*.   Additional information about .gov domains and election officials can be found here: https://home.dotgov.gov/about/elections/.

5. **Questions.** Please direct questions about this clerk communication to elections@wi.gov.

Encl:

Appendix A: How to Obtain a .gov Domain

How to Obtain a .gov Domain
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1. **Introduction**. Wisconsin jurisdictions can use either a wi.gov or .gov email address. The .gov domain is administered and managed at the federal level, while the wi.gov is administered at the state level. In both cases, the actual email is managed by a private email provider for a fee. These two different levels of administration require different sign-up processes, but both provide the trusted .gov domain.

   The following sections explain the different procedures to obtain either a wi.gov or a .gov email domain. Some parts of the instructions are technical in nature so you may wish to consult with your local IT support provider for assistance.

   a. **wi.gov**. All wi.gov email addresses are hosted by the Wisconsin Department of Administration Division of Enterprise Technology (DET). The wi.gov domain is owned by the State of Wisconsin and municipalities are able to use this service for free after requesting access from DET. Creating wi.gov email addresses require purchasing a business account from a private email provider such as Gmail, Outlook, or Yahoo. These private providers are ultimately who manage the domain. Most business email providers have technical support teams who can help you set up the right type of account and establish a wi.gov email address. If you already have a premium or business account with a private provider, your IT department can make these changes without any additional costs to you.

   Municipalities that would prefer to use a wi.gov domain can now contact WEC to submit a request. The WEC is only assisting with the set-up process. Municipalities will have full control over the mailbox title and will be able to use their domain name for their entire municipality (not just elections staff). The only cost associated with having a custom domain is establishing the business or premium email account with an email provider. Before making a request through the WEC, please follow these steps:

      i. Verify domain name availability. This can be done through several sites such as: https://mxtoolbox.com/SuperTool.aspx or https://menandmice.com/support/dig.

      ii. Choose an email provider offering business accounts (i.e. Gmail, Outlook, Yahoo, etc.).

      iii. Set up the new email domain using their process. This may require you to contact their IT support or helpdesk. Most have local government support staff to assist with the process.

      iv. Obtain a copy of the Mail Exchange (MX) record and/or Text (TXT) record from your email provider. Send this information to elections@wi.gov. These records inform the system that your email has permission to use the **wi.gov** domain. They can only be found after initially creating the new domain but may be located in different places depending on the provider you choose. Reach out to your local IT support or the email provider's support to get assistance locating them if needed.

      Your MX and TXT records will look like the examples below:

MX Record:

Priority	Name | Host | Alias	Value | Destination
1	@	ASPMX.L.GOOGLE.COM

TXT Record:

google-site-verification=6Jb2nvO4GKS6Uc830bk3dHkbYXA3FcDlLvH1Nc

   v.   WEC will then work with DET to submit the request and contact you when the records are setup as needed.

  vi.   After set-up is complete, feel free to send a test email to the Elections Helpdesk at elections@wi.gov.

b. **.gov Domain.** Recently the U.S. General Services Agency has transitioned management of the Top-Level Domain (TLD) for the **.gov** domain to the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA). To make this domain more accessible for local governments, CISA is waiving the annual $400 registration fee through September 30, 2021. CISA states that it intends to make this waiver permanent. Getting setup with a federal level **.gov** is entirely through CISA's "dotgov" website. For more information on signing up please visit https://home.dotgov.gov/registration/.

   i.   Check to see if the domain you want is available: https://domains.dotgov.gov/dotgov-web/registration/whois.xhtml

  ii.   Review **.gov** domain requirements: https://home.dotgov.gov/registration/requirements/

 iii.   Prepare and send the authorization letter to registrar@dotgov.gov. A template is available at https://home.dotgov.gov/registration/authorization-templates/city-county/

  iv.   Complete the online form

2. **Expanded Use of Trusted Domains.** Once a trusted domain has been set up for your email accounts, it can be used by anyone in your municipality. Additionally, trusted domains can be extended to your websites. This creates uniformity for communication tools across your jurisdiction, making it easier for your residents to find and trust important information.

3. **Questions.** For additional questions related to the **.gov** domains, please contact registrar@dotgov.gov. Questions related to the **wi.gov** domain can be sent to elections@wi.gov.