

WISCONSIN ELECTIONS COMMISSION

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Memorandum

DATE: September 23, 2016

TO: Wisconsin Municipal Clerks
Milwaukee City Elections Commission
Wisconsin County Clerks
Milwaukee County Elections Commission

FROM: Michael Haas
Administrator

Tony Bridges
WisVote Elections Specialist

SUBJECT: Address Enhancements to MyVote / WisVote

The WEC staff is pleased to announce that we have made some significant enhancements in how we handle addresses in WisVote, and in the MyVote Wisconsin website. Chief among these is that we have switched address validation services to a new vendor who is able to provide faster, more accurate and more reliable responses. We have also made some improvements to the logic we use for matching, and we have some more very promising improvements in progress. What this means to our users is an improved experience creating new addresses in WisVote, and a much improved experience throughout all of the services offered by MyVote.

WisVote, and SVRS before it, had used the same address validation service since 2011. That service was stable and reliable for many years. However, with the transition to WisVote and our newer, more transparent way of handling addressing, deficiencies in the old system became more obvious. At the same time the vendor for that addressing service switched from a disk-based system that was very fast and reliable, to an online-based system that caused significant performance and reliability concerns. After a period of evaluation and transition, we have selected a new vendor that was able to not only meet our performance and reliability needs, but was able to provide superior results.

This change is extremely promising by itself, but the address validation process is only one part of the matching system that enables us to compare user input against the records that clerks maintain in WisVote. We have also added additional matching criteria and new logic on MyVote that allows us to more reliably return a result from WisVote if it is available. As a result of these changes, the percentage of MyVote users that are able to locate their address for polling place, ballot, and clerk lookups, as well as the percentage of users that are able to successfully complete their click-and-mail applications, has been substantially improved. At the same time we have taken steps to minimize the possibility of a voter getting incorrect information from MyVote.

That said, no address matching process is perfect, and some percentage of addresses will always cause problems for users. While we have improved our matching, we have also tightened our restrictions on how much uncertainty we allow in a match on MyVote. This helps to ensure that voters are not given incorrect information, but it also means that when the system is not able to find a match for whatever reason, it is more likely that it will be unable to find information for them at all.

There are a number of things clerks can do to help voters find their addresses in MyVote. If the address exists in WisVote, and the voter is still unable to find it, we have compiled a list of search tips that have proven useful in these cases. That list is attached. If the address does not exist in WisVote, then the best solution is to add it. There are instructions on adding new addresses in Chapter 7 of the WisVote Manual, and WEC staff is available to assist you with any problems you might encounter. It is possible, due to the inexact nature of address matching, that an address may exist in WisVote and still cannot be found by searching in MyVote. On these occasions, contact the WEC Help Desk for assistance.

In addition to a much improved MyVote user experience, our testing has shown some surprise improvements clerks will appreciate in WisVote. The new address service is much less likely to use municipal abbreviations than the old one. This means newly created addresses are more likely to get postal cities like Lac du Flambeau and Sheboygan Falls, instead of LDF and Sheboygan Fls. The new address service is also more likely to return correct postal cities in tightly clustered areas. Addresses in Wauwatosa, for instance, are now more likely to say Wauwatosa instead of Milwaukee for the postal city. These benefits will only be seen when adding new addresses to WisVote. Existing addresses will still require manual changes if clerks wish for them to display this way.

As you know, voter addresses are key to all election processes, determining voter eligibility, voting jurisdiction and polling place, and the voter's proper ballot. The technology of address validation is not foolproof and can be inexact due to the variety of ways that addresses can be written and the difference between postal addresses and physical addresses. While many of us have experienced frustration regarding the handling of addresses in WisVote and MyVote, the Elections Commission staff has worked very hard to identify, test, and implement the best solution possible. We appreciate your patience with this process and hope that you will see a significant improvement with the new address validation service.

For any questions related to the address service improvements please contact the help desk at (608) 261-2028 or by email at elections@wisconsin.gov

Search Tips

- Include the full street number, name and type (For example, instead of 123 Main, try 123 Main St)
- Include any street direction (For example, instead of 123 Main St, try 123 N Main St)
- Use your postal city, rather than the city in which the address is located (For example, some address in Madison have a postal city of Verona)
- Use street type abbreviations (For example, St instead of Street)
- Do not use a pound sign for unit numbers (For example, 16 or Apt 16 instead of #16)