



Wisconsin Elections Commission

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DATE: For the April 18, 2020 Commission Meeting

TO: Members, Wisconsin Elections Commission

FROM: Meagan Wolfe, Administrator
Wisconsin Elections Commission

SUBJECT: Summary and Recommendations for 2020 HAVA CARES Act Grant

This memo summarizes the 2020 CARES Act Grant, provides an overview of WEC staff recommendations for utilizing the grant, and asks for Commission approval to accept grant funds and begin work on development of recommended initiatives.

Grant Amount

Allocation of \$7,332,471 to the State of Wisconsin Elections Commission.

Grant Match Requirement

Match of 20% or \$1,466,494. States must make a 20% match available within two years of receiving the funds. In kind contributions can be used towards the match, but they must be state (GPR) expenses made to support the purpose of the grant.

Grant Timeline

Grant funds can be used on expenditures starting on March 28, 2020. States cannot spend any federal funds on activities after December 31, 2020. The budget period for the federal funds ends on the Notice of Grant Award on December 31, 2020.

Grant Purpose

As authorized under Section 101 of the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-252) (HAVA) and provided for in the CARES Act, 2020 (Public Law 116-136), the purpose of this award is to “prevent, prepare for, and respond to coronavirus, domestically or internationally, for the 2020 Federal election cycle.”

Use of Grant Funds

Those allowable uses for CARE Act grant funds include:

- Printing of additional ballots and envelopes for potential higher levels of absentee or vote by mail processes
- Registration List Activities to improve the accuracy and currency of registrant addresses
- Upgrades of statewide or local databases to allow for online absentee or mail ballot requests or change of address
- Additional mailing and postage costs, including ballot tracking software
- Acquisition of additional voting equipment, including high speed or central count tabulators and

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hardware and software associated with signature comparison of returned absentee or mail ballots

- Installation and security for absentee or mail drop-boxes
- Temporary election office staffing
- Cleaning supplies and protective masks and equipment for staff and poll workers in early voting, vote center, or election day polling places
- Overtime salary and benefit costs for elections staff and poll workers
- Training of poll workers on sanitization procedures for in-person voting
- Public communication of changes in registration, ballot request options, or voting procedures, including information on coronavirus precautions being implemented during the voting process.
- Mailings to inform the public on changes or determination of procedures of coronavirus precautions, options in voting, and other voting information.
- Pre- and post-election deep cleaning of polling places
- Leasing of new polling places when existing sites must be closed
- Additional laptops and mobile IT equipment
- Additional automated letter opening equipment

WEC Staff Recommendations for CARES Act Spending Plan

Based on the experiences and lessons learned from the April election, WEC staff believes that there are four major areas where we must spend CARES Act funds in order to ready our state for the continued increase in vote by mail activity as well as to relieve some of the financial burden of this shift from local election jurisdictions.

1) Developing Ballot Tracking and Vote by Mail Processes into WisVote and MyVote

With the significant shift to voters requesting by mail absentee ballots WEC staff recommends making significant changes to the statewide voter registration database, and the MyVote Wisconsin website to integrate additional ballot tracking measures. There is also a significant need to adapt the absentee by mail processes in WisVote to more efficiently handle the increased demand on these modules. These changes will then allow WEC staff to make changes to the MyVote website to provide more detailed ballot tracking information and increase the overall usability of the system. Specifically, WEC staff would like to pursue the following changes:

- a) *Intelligent Bar Codes.* This change would allow voters and election officials to track ballots in the same way they track other important mail or packages. Intelligent barcodes create increased accountability for ballots that are sent as well as more transparency for voters to see where their ballot is in the postal system. Currently, voters can track their ballot on the MyVote website only through data supplied by WisVote, including the date a request was received, the date a ballot was mailed, and the date a ballot was returned to the clerk. Intelligent barcodes would allow voters to also track their ballot as it passed through the U.S. Postal Service delivery process. This change will involve significant IT development as well as licensing and software services to incorporate this process into current state systems used by local election officials and voters.
- b) *WisVote Development.* The current WisVote system is developed for local election officials to administer elections in a system where most voters cast ballots in-person on election day. With the shift to mostly by mail processes, the functions that support issuing and printing labels for

absentee ballots needs to be augmented. The most significant change would be incorporating intelligent bar codes into each absentee ballot record. There is also significant development needed to increase automated processes used to issue absentee ballots and to more efficiently allow the clerks to process large volumes of absentee requests. Audit options should be increased to provide additional options for user review of data for quality control purposes. WEC staff also anticipates developing additional voter mailing features in the system so that local election officials can create absentee ballot request mailers with instructions for voters.

- c) *MyVote Development.* The MyVote Wisconsin site is where voters can request an absentee ballot, register to vote online and see their voter history. In every election prior to April 2020, the most utilized features on the site were polling place and sample ballot look ups. Almost overnight, the most popular feature became “Request an Absentee.” While the site has previously undergone significant usability studies, with the new shift in voter behavior, voters are seeking more transparency into the absentee process and more advanced information about the status of their ballot. Therefore, there is a need to incorporate the intelligent barcodes and real time ballot tracking into voter records. There is also a need to conduct additional usability studies based on new voter behaviors to ensure that voters can navigate the site successfully and complete all required procedures, such as the photo ID attachment. There are also important opportunities to create additional links between the MyVote website and the WisVote database to allow absentee ballot requests from voters without their photo ID on file to be entered directly into a “pending” record in the database for clerks to review and approve without needing to do manual data entry.

2) Absentee Postage Costs

Another significant expense to local election jurisdictions in response to the COVID-19 crisis has been postage. Each absentee ballot requires the municipal clerk to provide delivery postage and return postage, averaging about \$1 per voter. As part of the WisVote proposed improvements to incorporate intelligent barcodes, WEC staff also recommends exploring incorporation of postage paid costs into the WisVote system. Staff recommends that unbudgeted postage costs be paid using federal grant funds for the August and November 2020 elections. Depending on future budgets, the WEC would then move to a “billing” system for postage to local jurisdictions starting in 2021. Local election jurisdictions have not budgeted for the additional postage expenses in 2020 as their budgets have traditionally focused on the historical need for in-person absentee and traditional election day polling places. This program would provide much needed support in 2020 and would allow local election officials an opportunity to budget for future postage and mailing expenses.

3) Absentee Ballot Envelopes

Currently, local election officials buy and plan for absentee by mail traffic consistent with historical numbers. Because of the recent dramatic increase in absentee by mail, many clerks do not have the envelopes they need to fulfill requests for the rest of the year. For the April 7 election, WEC bought a significant number of envelopes that were distributed to municipalities to fulfill their increased need. The current envelopes are ordered by each jurisdiction and the design does not allow for the incorporation of the intelligent bar code. There are many states with high volumes of absentee by

mail who have incorporated an intelligent barcode into their envelope design. A significant need for the local jurisdictions, if the intelligent barcode is incorporated into the process, will be to procure, print, and distribute new absentee ballot envelopes that will be conducive to this new process. Jurisdictions would be able to continue using their existing stock of envelopes for in-person absentee and care facility voting.

4) Sanitation Supplies and Personal Protective Equipment

Expenses may also be incurred to provide sanitation supplies, such as hand and surface sanitizer and wipes, and personal protective equipment such as masks and gloves for in-person absentee and for polling place voting. WEC provided supplies to local election officials for the April 7 election and will continue to survey clerks for their need for supplies for the remaining elections in 2020. There may also be FEMA reimbursement funds available to local election officials and the state specifically for sanitation and social distancing supplies. WEC staff will continue to evaluate needs, procurement opportunities, and other federal funding sources for these supplies.

Match Funds

The WEC believes that over the course of the next two-year period we will be able to produce the funds either using in-kind contributions and expenses already incurred for the April 7, 2020 election. In kind contributions for support to elections can also be used towards meeting the match obligation. There may also be requests from state partners for reimbursements of COVID-19 election expenses from April 7, 2020 that can be considered at a future meeting.

Recommended Motion

The Commission directs WEC staff to submit the CARES Act Certification letter to the U.S. EAC and to initiate the state process to accept the federal CARES Act grant funds. The Commission further directs WEC staff to begin development of the recommended improvements to the vote by mail process and preparedness for COVID-19 related issues for the 2020 election cycle using CARE Act grant funds.