



Wisconsin Elections Commission

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DATE: March 30, 2020

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

FROM: Meagan Wolfe
Administrator

SUBJECT: Consolidating Polling Places and Use of WisVote

This communication focuses on two issues related to the consolidation of polling places – the ability of municipal clerks to consolidate polling places as opposed to closing all polling places on Election Day, and the use of WisVote to check in voters at a consolidated polling location.

Consolidation of Polling Places vs. Closing Polling Places

Wisconsin Elections Commission (WEC) staff has received several inquiries to confirm the ability of municipal clerks to consolidate polling places at this time. In short, polling places may be consolidated by the municipal clerk but Election Day voting at the polls may not be eliminated completely.

At its meeting of March 12, 2020, the Commission adopted a motion stating that municipal clerks can relocate or move polling places for the Spring Election that are located in nursing homes or other care facilities as well as other facilities as determined by the Department of Health Services or local health officials, without obtaining prior approval of the local governing body or municipal elections commission. This motion was adopted because Wis. Stat. § 5.25 requires that polling places be established at least 30 days in advance of the election by the local governing body.

WEC staff has applied the Commission's directive to situations in which the continuing effects of COVID-19 require changes to or consolidation of polling locations regardless of where the polling place is currently planned. It has become clear that a shortage of available election inspectors due to COVID-19 is one of the most limiting factors related to the number of polling locations to be used. Many municipalities are contemplating or in the process of significant reductions in the number of polling places or consolidating existing sites.

WEC staff is confirming that, for the Spring Election as well as the May 12th Special Election in the 7th Congressional District, municipal clerks have the authority to consolidate polling places due to a shortage of election inspectors without receiving prior approval of the local governing body. When moving or consolidating polling places, municipalities should publicize any changes as broadly as possible through their websites, social media communications, and informing the local media. A

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notice should also be posted at the entrances to the original polling place to advise voters who appear of the new location.

Consolidating polling places is, of course, not the same as closing all polling places for Election Day voting. Municipal clerks and local officials do not have the authority to eliminate the opportunity for Election Day voting, at least absent an order from a state or local health official. If a polling place is closed due to such an order, the municipal clerk should immediately contact WEC staff and the county clerk so that possible options can be discussed and coordinated. In the event the public health order is limited to a specific polling location, the clerk and inspectors should attempt to adjourn to another location pursuant to Wis. Stat. § 7.37(1).

Consolidation of Polling Places in Municipalities Utilizing WisVote

The Wisconsin Elections Commission is committed to working with county and municipal clerks to carry out their Election Day duties in the safest manner possible. Many municipalities are facing difficult circumstances such as poll worker shortages and lack of polling places as a result of COVID-19.

Typically, municipalities with a population over 35,000 utilize multiple polling places and maintain one poll book per ward, however larger municipalities do not have enough poll workers to meet this requirement for the upcoming election. Additionally, municipal clerks are attempting to reduce the incidence of voters and poll workers repeated touching of the same surface, as would occur with use of a paper poll book. They are also attempting to reduce the number of locations they will need to adequately sanitize throughout the day. In response to these challenges, some municipalities have approached WEC staff with a request to modify WisVote to support consolidated polling places for the 2020 Spring Election and Presidential Preference. This process would allow clerks to manage many wards and voters in one space, without paper poll books.

After consultation with these municipalities, WEC staff agreed to limited WisVote development to support this approach. Using this approach, the poll worker would verify the voter's photo ID and then search WisVote directly to determine if the voter is registered, in the correct voting location, and that their stated name and address match what is in WisVote. The poll worker would then print a report from the voter's record and have the voter sign the report to fulfill the requirement to sign the poll book. The report would include the voter's name, address, ward, ballot style, and their sequential voter number.

One municipality has also requested the ability to enter Election Day voter registrations directly in WisVote instead of using a paper process. The municipality would still need to collect signatures and affirmations to eligibility questions from the voter as part of the registration process. At the end of the night, the clerk would pull an additional report that would include all voters who had checked in through this process and what voter number they were assigned. The total number of voters per ward would be compared to the total number of ballots processed at the polling place for end of night reconciliation.

These updates to WisVote are low risks to the system, however WisVote has never been used to directly support Election Day processes before. WEC staff has limited time to develop and test this new process. If municipal clerks are interested in using this process for the Spring Election, please contact WEC staff.