Denton County's Smooth Transition to Paper-Ballot Elections

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Acceptance testing—Verity Scan in-person digital scanners

The eyes of Texas – and election watchers across the nation – were upon Denton County as it launched all-paper voting on a brand-new system.

Problem

When it came time for Denton County, Texas to replace its aging voting system, community insistence on a move to all-paper balloting signaled a major shift. Serving more than 472,000 registered voters from 179 polling places, the Elections Office for the growing North Texas County was adjusting to other significant changes as well. Adding to the pressure: the need for a smooth transition to a new voting system and method in time for the November 7, 2017 election – with a September election in the interim.

Action

County officials chose to stay with experienced election solution provider, Hart InterCivic, trusting the company's change management expertise and new, easy-to-use Verity system.

Results

November 7, 2017, Denton County conducted its first successful all-paper-ballot election, using Hart's Verity system. Voters were pleased with the security and ease of casting their ballots. Poll workers and election officials look forward to a long future with the easy-to-use system. The compact, lightweight Verity system is easy to store, transport and set up, and it provides a paper trail – a feature Denton County Commissioners deemed a necessity.

(left to right) Denton County Elections Administrator and Deputy Elections Administrator Frank Phillips and Brandy Grimes, Hart Project Manager Julian Montoya (center)

Stepping into the Future of Denton County Elections

Last summer, Denton County Commissioners mandated a switch to 100 percent paper ballots – and the race was on to make the transition to Denton County's new voting system in time for the November constitutional amendment election. With a new Elections Administrator at the helm, shifting team member roles, new warehouse management software and a migration to a new electronic poll book system, the Verity implementation and move to paper ballots stood out as the election team's primary change initiatives.

Selecting Verity made sense for Elections Administrator Frank Phillips, who had returned to Denton County in December 2016. "Verity is the only new

system that is both Texas-certified and federally certified by the EAC [Election Assistance Commission]. Other vendors are still selling old technology," he said.

"One of the biggest plusses is that it can be configured in a variety of different ways – all electronic, a mixture of paper and electronic, or all paper. With other systems, I'd be reluctant to recommend all paper because of the expense and logistics of pre-printing all those ballots. Verity provides true on-demand ballot printing. Voters check in, and a bar code scan identifies the appropriate ballot to print for that voter."

Phillips added, "Denton County wanted to stay with a trusted partner. We rely on Hart to provide a level of service I don't believe we'd find with another vendor."

Phillips' strong leadership and highly capable team were vital to the project's success. Throughout the transition, Hart's experienced project manager, Julian Montoya, was regularly on site, listening to concerns, suggesting solutions and explaining what to expect. He set up timelines and guided the team to meet every deadline.

"He was on top of all of it. Any time we called him, he was right there," said Phillips. "I also liked that Hart put us in touch with other counties that had implemented a configuration similar to ours."

Expedited Delivery and Smooth Acceptance Testing

Within weeks of the Commissioners' approval of the Verity purchase, Hart's project manager was on

site overseeing delivery of new equipment and preparing for acceptance testing of each device. He worked with County staff to develop a timeline, coordinating personnel and resource needs. Over 40 days, the team tested more than 1,300 Verity units. Hart also coordinated removal of the County's legacy equipment, freeing up valued warehouse space.

Planning and Training to Prepare Staff

Crossing the bridge to Denton County's election future required planning and training. The Hart project manager's long career in election administration and experience implementing Verity for other jurisdictions smoothed the way for the Denton team. He guided them through a business process analysis, leading discussions about existing Elections Office processes, needed changes and contingency planning. By helping the Denton team examine current ways of doing things and "turning over every rock," he assisted them in identifying where processes needed to change to make the most of Verity's capabilities, accommodate the shift to all paper voting and streamline operations.

Together, the team considered planning for scenarios such as "What if you had to hand off responsibilities in the middle of an election cycle?" Election staff set up checklists, communication plans and backups, with Hart's help to fill in gaps in documenting, troubleshooting and creating decision trees. For example, one discussion of the best ways to communicate answers to common questions resulted in establishing Election Day

hotline protocols. The switch from Hart's legacy system to Verity's up-to-the-minute software brings new levels of security, flexibility, efficiency and ease to tasks such as creating ballots, pre-defining equipment, managing absentee and tabulating results. Staff members responsible for these tasks learned Verity's new methods in one-on-one training sessions with the Hart project manager. The project manager remained available throughout the implementation to answer any questions.

Denton County's technical lead, Jason Slonaker, said, "This is a multi-vendor implementation with Verity and the [electronic poll books]. I've had questions all over the place, but it's been a pretty easy implementation."
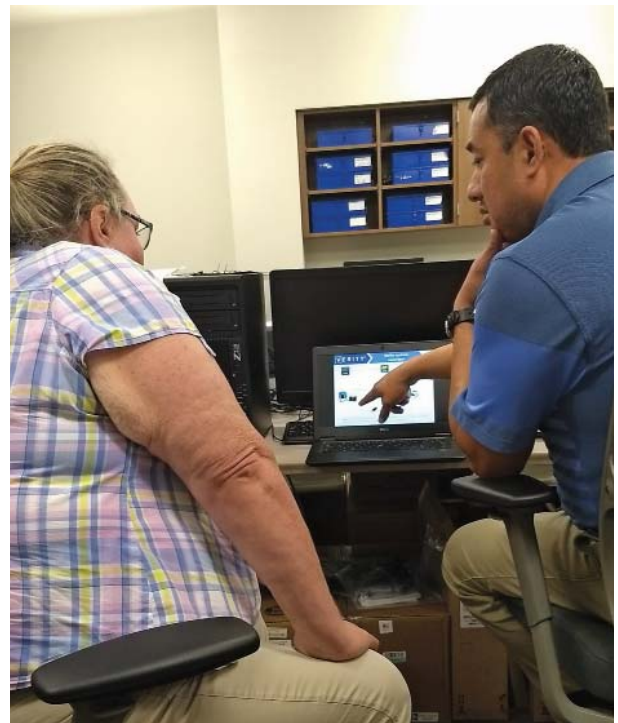
One-on-one staff training with Hart project manager.

Denton County trained more than 200 poll workers.

Mock Election Advances Training

The Elections Office staff hosted an open house Sept. 11-13, inviting party chairs, commissioners and poll workers to participate in a "mock election."

Conducting this dress-rehearsal election allowed staff to go through each step to validate everything it takes to create an election and to fine tune checklists. Hart's project manager helped staff dig into layers of responsibility to identify tasks such as election night reporting. By stepping through setup and functionality, the team was able to identify bottlenecks and develop processes allowing time for all tasks, such as preparing electronic media used for device setup.

For staff members, this dry run served as a real-world opportunity to solidify skills learned in training.

For poll workers, the exercise marked the beginning of informal training and buy-in. Workers were excited, vocal and eager to get their hands on the new equipment. Those who took advantage of the hands-on experience became confident leaders during formal poll worker training.

Training Instills Polling Place Confidence

Denton County's team knew that in-person voters would experience the election through the lens of poll workers' confidence in the new system and procedures. To arm the County's more than 200 election judges and other workers with the knowledge needed to operate independently and efficiently at the polling place, Training Lead Coordinator Paula Paschal worked with Hart's

project manager and her team to create a detailed training plan.

Hart had provided a wealth of resources – what Paschal described as "an overkill amount of training materials" – and a sample election database to use in the classroom. The illustrated, step-by-step instructions and pacing of the courses helped keep learners engaged. Paschal said, "The field guide is extremely helpful, and it's designed to allow us to tailor topics to our own needs."

Denton County is fortunate to have a loyal following of polling place workers who return, election after election, to serve their community. The big aha moment for these dedicated workers, both at the open house and during formal training? Every voter will cast a paper ballot.

Paschal said, "I was surprised at how quickly the poll workers picked up Verity. It worked well to have an open house before the poll worker training."

A key election team decision simplified logistics for poll workers. Elections Office staff would deliver all the equipment to polling places and set it up. "Shifting to this new system was quite a change," said Brandy Grimes, Deputy Elections Administrator. "Our staff will continue to deploy the polling place equipment. This ensures that everything is set up properly and that equipment is connected in the correct sequence."

Verity's Denton County Debut

Denton County voters first experienced Verity with the November 2017 election. Ballots included statewide constitutional amendments, plus 11 additional district elections (two school districts, seven cities and two small water districts).

"It was fantastic," said Elections Administrator Phillips. "Given the short time period from the contract signing to acceptance testing, staff training, poll worker training, the election was a huge success."

Check in and ballot printing were smooth, and voters quickly had ballots in hand. As voters scanned their completed ballots, they received the acknowledgment, "Your vote has been counted."

The last site closed at 10:15 p.m., and vote totals were reported by 10:30. With efficient polling place operations and streamlined early vote counting, results reporting was quick.

Hands-on exercises keep learner's engaged.

Importantly, the public received the assurance it sought with the return to paper ballots. "With paper, we can show the vote was counted as it should have been," said Phillips. "If there's a recount we go straight back to the ballot that was cast."

Long-Term Solution Built on Trust

The November election cycle has concluded, but Hart's assistance in Denton County continues. Following the election, the Hart project manager met with the Denton team to discuss how to build on successes and apply efficiencies and lessons learned to larger elections.

With the completion of its Verity implementation phase, Denton County continues to have 24/7/365 access to expert support through Hart's Customer Support Center.

"I talk to election administrators everywhere," said Phillips. I never get negative comments about Hart, but I do get them about other vendors. If you can't depend on your voting system vendor, you might be in trouble. It's never an issue with Hart."

Conclusion

Denton County Commissioners set the bar high, and the Elections Office delivered with the help of Verity Voting and the skilled Hart team.

The Denton transition to new equipment and processes was efficient and thoughtful. Their secure, transparent and user-friendly November election set the stage for successful voting for years to come.

DENTON COUNTY'S TRANSITION TO VERITY

Dec 2016
Frank Phillips returns to Denton County as Elections Administrator.

June 2017
County Commissioners approve the purchase of Verity's paper ballot configuration.

July 2017
Implementation begins.

Aug 2017
Acceptance testing and staff training begin.

Sept 9, 2017
Last election using Hart's legacy DRE system.

Sept 11–13, 2017
Verity debuts at mock election.

Sept–Oct 2017
Hands-on poll worker training.

Oct 23, 2017
Early voting begins with first ballots printed by Denton County staff.

Nov 7, 2017
First successful, secure paper-ballot election using Verity in Denton County.

Ongoing
Hart input on best practices, plus training and support for future independent elections.