Managing Wait Times in Montgomery County

October 16, 2019

Montgomery County Board of Elections staff began measuring wait times to vote after the 2012 Presidential General Election, when voters in Maryland were reported to have faced among the longest lines in the country. National survey data indicated that the average wait time for that election in Montgomery County, as in the rest of the state, exceeded the benchmark of 30 minutes that would later be set by the Presidential Commission on Election Administration.

According to political scientist Charles Stewart of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, author of the often-cited paper titled "Waiting to Vote in 2012," the average voter in Montgomery County waited 33 minutes to cast their ballot in the 2012 general election, significantly less than the large-county average of 50 minutes but only slightly less than the statewide average of 36 minutes.

Montgomery County staff were invited to participate in initial discussions with the Presidential Commission on Election Administration about the causes for long lines at polling places and worked with the Bipartisan Policy Center to develop consistent methods across jurisdictions nationwide for measuring wait times at the polls.

For the 2016 general election, the average wait time in Maryland was reduced to 15.7 minutes according to MIT's Election Performance Index. Again, Montgomery County's wait times were shorter than other jurisdictions in the state. However, the introduction of paper ballots led to multiple points where lines could develop inside the polling place as the voter moved through the voting steps at check-in, to the ballot table, to the voting station, to the scanner. While many of our peer jurisdictions measure only the wait time to check in, Montgomery County scrapped the simplistic tool and introduced more complicated measures.

For the 2018 general election, wait times were reduced to an average of approximately 7 minutes The 2018 Election wait time measures include the length of time at each stop in the process. This data was utilized to prepare the January 2019 report on wait times in Montgomery County when voting (tinyurl.com/y47yzynf).

The staff has begun the process of reviewing equipment and poll worker allocations using the combined data gathered from the wait survey data, ballot use data, census and wait time data and demographic makeup of the precincts. The process begins with the Director and Operations Manager, with input from staff and guidance from State Board staff, and encompasses planning for two elections, the primary and general elections. This will take several months and be provided to the State Board to approve.

Board staff ordered additional equipment and expect to add significant numbers of Election Judges, especially for the General Election. Montgomery County advertises wait times for early voting on the website and using social media. Staff will measure wait times in the Primary Election then adjust accordingly for the Presidential General Election of 2020.