

Municipality staff fill new roles during election, pandemic

SOUND OFF 

Departments assist one another on Election Day

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WAUKESHA — With the COVID-19 pandemic, chaos over the spring primary election and much of the day-to-day business shut down, municipal employees are living anything but a typical existence these days. But despite the challenges, they're filling in where needed to keep things running as smoothly as possible.

Nine members of the Waukesha Public Library staff helped at the city clerk's office for two weeks before the election, processing a number of absentee ballot requests ballooned by voters opting to physically stay away from the polls during the pandemic and the city encouraging them to do so. Fifteen more library staff helped at the

Schuetze Building on Election Day.

"One staff member's first day was March 16, when we were first closed," said Waukesha Public Library Executive Director Bruce Gay. "She's been working for the city clerk since then."

The library also loaned out hand sanitizer stations and a dozen WiFi USB hub connectors to help accommodate social distancing as more departments moved to remote work.

"There's been a lot of that going around," Gay said. "We're lucky to have some things we can lend out, and we're happy to do that."

Thirteen Waukesha Parks, Recreation and Forestry staff assisted the clerks' office and continue to do so.

"They jumped at the opportunity to work and help out with the election,"

Waukesha Mayor Shawn Reilly said. Fire Department personnel have also shifted their typical commitments to manage the county's Emergency Operations Center. Reilly named Battalion Chief Jim Haakenson in particular. The city's Fire Prevention Bureau has also shifted focus to delivering educational messages related to COVID-19 awareness through community Zoom meetings.

In Brookfield, Mayor Steve Ponto said City Clerk Kelly Michaels organized an effort to get ballots processed by an adequate number of city staff.

"We have people from other departments helping as poll workers and also handling the processing of all the ballots that were mailed out," Ponto said. "And during the counting of the ballots which will

take place Monday."

Ponto said the city saw more than 12,000 mail-in ballots this year, when most years see not quite 3,000.

"This election had its own very unique set of stresses," he said. "Most people really have stepped up and tried to be helpful even outside their normal role. ... That really gives you a good feeling to their decision to public service." City staff and even some high school students helped out.

During Tuesday's election, Brookfield opened the doors of its new conference center to the public for the first time. It served as the city's only polling place that day. City Engineer Joe Pew put his design skills to use laying out the main ballroom to accommodate social distancing and allow voters to exercise their civic duty safely. About 2,000 people voted at the conference center Tuesday, Ponto said.

Thiensville Village Administrator Colleen Landisch-Hansen said the village prioritized limiting exposure to high risk poll workers, many of whom are in the older age group that ought to practice particular caution over COVID-19.

"I actually helped work the polls on Tuesday, (and) that probably wasn't something I normally would have done," said Landisch-Hansen, who is 39. "Our clerk was also working."

Thiensville Village President Van Mobley said the village employees "have done a very good job."

In West Bend, City Clerk Stephanie Justmann said eight Washington County employees from the highway department, two state employees and six members of the National Guard showed up to work the polls.

"It helped me tremendously," she said. "It filled in where poll workers called in at the last

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minute."

Oconomowoc City Clerk Diane Coenen said help came from all city departments for the election.

"They were basically helping us for a solid two weeks," she said. "We could not have done it without them."

Coenen said her three-person clerk's department would have had real trouble finishing the job without that boost from other municipal employees.

"In elections in the past, the poll workers have largely been older people, and older people for good reason were reluctant to be involved in this spring election," Ponto said. "Fortunately for everyone involved, people of all ages and backgrounds in our local municipalities were willing to step in."