



## **PRESS RELEASE**

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### **Secretary of State Releases Results of Mobile Polling Study**

*Vermont pilot project to expand voter accessibility for elderly*

*Shelburne.* Today Vermont Secretary of State Deb Markowitz, along with Jason Karlawish, M.D., Associate Professor of Medicine and Medical Ethics, University of Pennsylvania; and Charles Sabatino, Director of the American Bar Association's Commission on Law and Aging, released the results of a study of Vermont's mobile polling pilot project.

During the 2008 general election, the Vermont Secretary of State's Office joined with the University of Pennsylvania and the American Bar Association to develop a pilot program where trained election workers brought ballots to residential care facilities prior to the election to permit eligible residents to register and vote. Residents who were unable to vote independently were offered assistance from bipartisan pairs of election workers who had been trained to work with elderly voters, and in particular, voters who have cognitive impairment.

Markowitz said, "Vermont participated in this study of mobile polling because those of us who administer elections need to be prepared for the challenges of meeting the needs of an aging population." According to the United States Census Bureau, the number of Americans who are 55 and older will nearly double between 2007 and 2030, from 20 percent of the population (60 million) to 31 percent (107.6 million). Markowitz said, "This means that as we plan for future elections we must consider the challenges presented by the aging of America and explore new ways to reach voters who are in residential care facilities to ensure that they are provided an opportunity to vote, and to prevent voter intimidation or fraud. Mobile polling is a great way to accomplish this."

The American Bar Association adopted a policy in 2007 urging states to improve access to voting by residents of long term care facilities by use of mobile polling. "Vermont is in the forefront of states in making this policy a reality and showing that it profoundly enhances the quality of participation in the election process," said Sabatino. "About half the states have some policy that provides for limited outreach to nursing homes by election officials, but there has not been a serious study of mobile polling as a best practice."

Karlawish said, “The results of this study are compelling and convincing because we designed this project to compare mobile polling to usual voting using nursing homes that were well matched in terms of the number of residents and the severity of their cognitive disabilities.” Working with Dr. Karlawish and Mr. Sabatino, the Secretary of State’s Office trained local election workers and recruited residential care facilities to participate in the project. Twenty-four facilities took part - 15 facilities voted as usual and nine facilities conducted mobile polling. After the election, individual participants were surveyed to assess problems and challenges.

The findings of the study discuss both the challenges and benefits of implementing mobile polling. Key general findings include:

- **Absentee balloting is very common in long term care facilities.** When mobile polling is not offered, residents who vote will do so using an absentee ballot. This confirms previous research and makes sense because residents of long term care facilities often are disabled so that going to the polling place to vote is difficult.
- **Most residents of long term care facilities need assistance voting.** Typically, this means reading the ballot out loud to the voter and helping mark the ballot. This confirms the fact that residents of long term care facilities may be uniquely vulnerable to undue influence and fraud, and confirms the value of having a bi-partisan pair of trained election workers assisting voters in long term care facilities.
- **Voting in long term care facilities without the benefit of mobile polling opens the process up to arbitrary decision about who may vote and fraud and abuse.** Although the study was not designed to uncover fraud or abuse, the study found that without mobile polling nursing home residents are more susceptible to a greater opportunity for both staff and family members to unduly influence voting by residents.

The overall findings of the study indicate that mobile polling is a beneficial alternative for reaching residents of long term care facilities.

- **Residents of long term care facilities like mobile polling.** Nursing home staff and elections workers observed that residents liked the mobile polling experience because it respected their dignity; made them feel like full citizens because their experience is closer to the civic experience of going to a polling place; and it gives them additional contact with the community and fosters feelings of independence, pride, importance and that they are valued by the community.
- **Mobile polling promotes increased accessibility to voting.** Residents of the long term care facilities did not have to worry about transportation to the polls or arranging for an absentee ballot.
- **Mobile polling was beneficial to nursing home staff.** Nursing home staff reported that mobile polling made the registration and voting process easier. It relieved their discomfort about assisting residents with cognitive impairment and it increased the legitimacy of the process, reducing the threat of fraud, undue influence and coercion. They were also pleased because it reduced their workload by streamlining the voting process.

- **Election officials saw benefits in mobile polling.** Election officials found that mobile polling was a good way to assist residents of long term care. They felt that having trained election workers assist voters in bipartisan pairs helps to minimize concerns of voter fraud and manipulation for residents of long term care facilities. Some election workers noted that mobile polling could help reduce the workload on Election Day as it permits them to serve voters in advance.

Implementing mobile polling presents challenges. The principal challenge is the time it takes for election workers to conduct the mobile polling. Although, on average the mobile polling itself took only an hour or two, setting up mobile polling, and finding and training election workers can be time consuming at a time when the clerks are already busy preparing for an election and serving early voters.

The results of this study will be delivered to the United States Elections Assistance Commission, the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging, the National Association of Secretaries of State, and the National Association of Election Administrators.

Publication of the full report is expected in the coming year. To learn more about facilitating voting as people age and addressing the challenges of cognitive impairment, visit [www.pennadc.org](http://www.pennadc.org).

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