



# Recruiting and Retaining Poll Workers During the Coronavirus Pandemic

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# Contents

## **1 Introduction and summary**

## **4 The importance of U.S. poll workers**

- 5 Recommendations for individuals
- 7 Recommendations for state and local governments
- 9 Recommendations for for-profit businesses
- 10 Recommendations for professional associations
- 11 Recommendations for political parties
- 12 Recommendations for high schools
- 14 Recommendations for colleges and universities
- 15 Recommendations for nonprofits and philanthropic organizations
- 17 Recommendations for religious communities

## **18 Conclusion**

## **19 About the authors**

## **20 Endnotes**

# Introduction and summary

Poll workers are champions of democracy. These dedicated individuals sacrifice their time—and, in the age of COVID-19, risk exposure—to help ensure that family, friends, and neighbors have a meaningful voice in the democratic system. Unfortunately, poll workers are increasingly in short supply. During the 2016 election, nearly 65 percent of jurisdictions reported that it was “very difficult” or “somewhat difficult” to obtain sufficient numbers of poll workers.<sup>1</sup> In 2018, the proportion of jurisdictions reporting difficulties increased to nearly 70 percent.<sup>2</sup> Poll worker shortages can lead to fewer polling places, longer lines, and, in a pandemic, potential health risks for voters.

Such shortages pose even more of a problem this year because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Poll workers across the country have resigned en masse due to possible health risks.<sup>3</sup> Older poll workers, who make up the bulk of volunteers, are especially likely to step down from their duties given their susceptibility to COVID-19 complications. According to a 2017 study by the Election Assistance Commission (EAC), nearly 60 percent of poll workers are at least 61 years of age—and roughly one-quarter of all poll workers are 71 years or older.<sup>4</sup> The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has determined that individuals within these age groups are at higher risk of severe complications from COVID-19, with people aged 65 or older accounting for 80 percent of all virus-related deaths in the United States.<sup>5</sup> Thus, although poll worker shortages are not a new phenomenon for many jurisdictions, they have worsened on account of the pandemic.

To ensure that our elections—and democracy—continue to function, we must recruit new poll workers to replace older workers who have resigned due to health concerns related to the virus. And once poll workers are recruited, considerable efforts must be made to keep them. This includes efforts to make them feel safe by providing all necessary training and personal protective equipment and by offering recognition for their notable service to our democracy.

This report provides recommendations for recruiting and retaining poll workers. Specifically, it includes recruitment and retainment ideas that can be undertaken by:

- Individuals
- State and local governments
- Professional associations
- Political parties
- High schools
- Colleges and universities
- Nonprofits and philanthropic organizations
- Religious communities

There are many ways to bring more poll workers into the fold. Some recruitment methods may be unique to a specific entity or applicable only in certain contexts, while others—such as adopting a polling place or using social media accounts to amplify calls for more poll workers—can be employed or customized by any individual or entity. Similarly, although there is value in any and all efforts to recruit poll workers this year, some strategies are more effective than others in reaching the ultimate goal of ensuring that in-person voting locations are fully staffed. Below are five recommendations that will prove particularly effective at recruiting adequate numbers of poll workers:

1. Relax or eliminate service requirements, generally imposed by state law, that would prevent otherwise qualified individuals from filling poll worker shortages. These include age restrictions and requirements that poll workers be registered for a minimum amount of time in a precinct where they will serve.
2. Offer employees paid time off for serving as poll workers. In particular, government entities should consider providing employees with hazard pay. Government officials, businesses, and nonprofits can also offer stipends to young people who serve as poll workers, similar to summer jobs programs.
3. During the pandemic and economic recession, contact furloughed employees about opportunities to serve as poll workers, where they will earn money. In addition, it is vital to ensure that poll worker compensation will not jeopardize their eligibility to receive unemployment benefits.
4. School districts can provide credit hours for students who train and serve as poll workers. Many school districts require students to complete community service or service-learning hours before graduation.
5. Explore offering free child care services on the days that people serve as poll workers. As stated in a prior Center for American Progress issue brief: In November, “Child care services should be conveniently located at or near polling places if space permits and must comply with public health guidelines, including guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention regarding child care programs.”<sup>6</sup>

## So you want to be a poll worker?

Serving as a poll worker is a great way to serve your community, become more civically involved, and protect our democracy by safeguarding the fundamental right to vote. In addition, poll workers often get paid. It is important to note from the outset that states have varying rules for who may qualify to serve as a poll worker.<sup>7</sup> Some jurisdictions have age restrictions, while others require poll workers to be affiliated with a political party. Still other jurisdictions allow only those who live or vote in a particular neighborhood to serve. There are a number of excellent resources to help those interested in becoming poll workers navigate the sign-up process.

For instance, the EAC recently launched a helpful tool for National Poll Worker Recruitment Day that connects individuals with information on applicable poll worker requirements and how to sign up to serve within their communities, along with direct links to relevant state and local webpages.<sup>8</sup> After signing up, individuals can share the resource with friends, family, neighbors, and colleagues to encourage them to join in helping to ensure that elections are carried out safely this fall and that every vote gets counted.

In the absence of significant recruitment and retainment efforts, concerns over health risks could result in nationwide poll worker shortages during the November election. This, in turn, could undermine Americans' fundamental right to vote. These catastrophes can and must be avoided through comprehensive poll worker recruitment and retaining efforts via a mass mobilization of the public and private sectors.

# The importance of U.S. poll workers

Poll workers are essential for administering U.S. elections. They staff in-person polling places and are responsible for checking in voters and providing them with ballots on which to cast votes. They guide voters through registration processes, assist those with certain disabilities in operating accessible voting machinery, and answer a plethora of complicated questions by voters. Indeed, if elections are intricate symphonies where secretaries of state and local election officials are the composers and conductors, respectively, poll workers are the musicians who bring elections to life and make sure that they work for members of the public. During the 2016 presidential election, more than 917,600 poll workers operated 116,900 polling places nationwide; in the 2018 midterm election, more than 637,700 poll workers served on Election Day.<sup>9</sup>

However, this year, the coronavirus pandemic has thrown a sizable wrench into poll worker recruitment, and jurisdictions nationwide are struggling to obtain enough workers to fully staff in-person voting locations for upcoming elections. In a July letter to Gov. Larry Hogan (R-MD), the president of the Maryland Association of Election Officials warned of nearly 14,000 poll worker vacancies statewide, writing: “Recruiting Election Judges is the most difficult task for the Local Boards under normal circumstances. In the midst of the public health crisis, it is turning into an impossible task.”<sup>10</sup> Later, on August 4, the Wisconsin Elections Commission announced that election officials were short at least 900 workers for the statewide August 11 primary.<sup>11</sup> There have been reports of jurisdictions in Florida, Minnesota, and Ohio experiencing similar challenges.<sup>12</sup>

Without sufficient numbers of poll workers, in-person voting locations must close. For example, during Wisconsin’s April primary, roughly 7,000 poll workers resigned statewide because of the novel coronavirus, which led in-person early voting opportunities to be slashed considerably in the state’s two largest cities. And in Milwaukee, 175 of 180 polling places shuttered their doors.<sup>13</sup> Polling locations were also forced to close due to poll worker shortages in Georgia, Kentucky, and Texas.<sup>14</sup> When in-person options are limited, large numbers of voters are forced to congregate at the few polling places remaining, leading to long lines and wait times. This, in turn, risks potential disenfranchisement.

## Many voters will be relying on in-person voting this November

Expanded access to vote by mail means that fewer people are likely to visit polling places and cast ballots in person this year. That said, jurisdictions must still prepare to administer wide-scale in-person voting and must maintain or even increase total polling place numbers in order to comply with social distancing mandates. Even with expanded access to mail voting, a significant number of Americans will still opt to vote in person.<sup>15</sup>

As described in a previous CAP report, some voters, including those with disabilities and people of color, need or prefer to vote in

person for accessibility purposes and/or because they lack access to reliable mail service.<sup>16</sup> In-person polling places also serve as an important fail-safe for those who request absentee ballots but do not receive them in time due to administrative challenges or postal delays. In order to ensure that polling places are fully staffed in November, jurisdictions must aim to recruit poll workers at least at normal levels. Ideally, however, jurisdictions should have an overabundance of poll workers on hand in case some call in sick during voting periods.

In order to protect the democratic process and the fundamental right to vote, it is vital that jurisdictions have sufficient poll workers to staff polling places and assist voters in casting ballots that count. To meet this goal, however, local elections officials need help from the public. Protecting free and fair elections is a duty shared by all. Everyone, from high school teachers and for-profit CEOs to faith leaders and members of state bar associations, has a civic responsibility to assist with poll worker recruitment and ensure that in-person voting is conducted safely and efficiently this fall.

Outlined below are recommendations for recruiting and retaining poll workers that can be undertaken by individuals, governments, and various nonprofit and for-profit entities.

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### Recommendations for individuals

Given severe shortages of poll workers this election cycle, eligible Americans should consider stepping forward to serve as poll workers, provided they are not at high risk of severe illness from COVID-19 and feel sufficiently safe working at a polling place. Moreover, there are many steps that individuals can take to help recruit poll workers. Individuals should consider undertaking the following actions:

- If you and members of your household are not at high risk of serious illness from COVID-19, you should consider serving as a poll worker to help make the upcoming election run more smoothly.<sup>17</sup> There are many online resources that describe poll worker duties and explain how to sign up to be a poll worker in your state.<sup>18</sup>

- Tap into your personal and professional networks to encourage poll worker volunteerism, especially in communities with the most need. It is especially important to try to recruit young healthy people who may be less likely to become seriously ill from COVID-19. In some states, people as young as 16 years old can serve as poll workers.<sup>19</sup>
- People who speak foreign languages are especially useful as poll workers.<sup>20</sup> For example, in 2018, at least 24 percent of Los Angeles County’s poll workers were required to be bilingual in one of 16 languages.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, sign language interpreters play important roles at polling places.<sup>22</sup>
- Newly naturalized citizens should consider serving as poll workers.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, many states also allow people to be poll workers if they are lawful permanent residents of the United States without citizenship.<sup>24</sup>
- If you have a disability and are not at higher risk from COVID-19, your presence as a poll worker is important for various reasons, including that it helps make other disabled people feel more welcomed. Moreover, those with disabilities can provide helpful guidance for election officials and other poll workers.<sup>25</sup> Some jurisdictions even recruit individuals from local disability agencies and disability rights groups.<sup>26</sup>
- Find creative ways to use your social media accounts—and other communications tools—to spread the word about the importance of poll workers. If people in your network amplify your messaging, you can reach an increasingly large audience in what is sometimes called “snowball recruiting.”<sup>27</sup>
- If you are out of work and would like to earn some money while helping your community, consider serving as a poll worker. Most states pay poll workers for their time.<sup>28</sup> However, it is important to ensure that poll worker compensation will not jeopardize eligibility to receive unemployment benefits.
- If you are a census worker whose job will conclude sometime before the election, consider using your professional skills as a poll worker.<sup>29</sup>
- If you are a current or recently laid off volunteer with a national service program—such as AmeriCorps VISTA, the Peace Corps, or Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Corps—consider becoming a poll worker.

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## Recommendations for state and local governments

State and local governments have multiple avenues to creatively recruit and retain poll workers, even though their resources may be limited. They should consider undertaking the following actions:

- Governors, secretaries of state, election administrators, and other state and local officials should use their bully pulpits to encourage all eligible people to serve as poll workers. Actions could include speeches, public service announcements (PSAs), or press statements, as well as aggressive outreach to businesses, nonprofit entities, unions, high schools, colleges, universities, community groups, political parties, and others. Where possible, they should coordinate messaging with other public officials for additional impact.<sup>30</sup>
- Add banners to government webpages directing people to websites with information about how to become poll workers—and ask businesses and nonprofit entities to do the same.<sup>31</sup> States or counties should also set up secure online portals where people can learn about how to become poll workers, apply online, and host information or training sessions.<sup>32</sup>
- Encourage for-profit and nonprofit entities, as well as a range of other organizations, to “adopt” a polling place—a model that has been used by some jurisdictions for decades. Adopting a polling place allows a group of people to join forces and recruit people from within their organization to successfully staff a polling place. In some cases, an entity may decide to donate any money earned by its employees.<sup>33</sup>
- Recruit government employees, who often have the necessary skills to perform technical and public-facing components of working at a polling place.<sup>34</sup> Offer government employees paid time off for training and serving as poll workers and consider providing them with additional incentives such as hazard pay or a stipend and/or additional vacation days.<sup>35</sup>
- Form partnerships with businesses or nonprofit entities to give stipends to young people who serve as poll workers, similar to summer jobs programs. This would help recruit a new generation of younger poll workers.<sup>36</sup>
- Election Day is a very long workday for poll workers, who generally must arrive in the early morning to help set up and work until after the polls close in the evening. Where possible, government officials should allow poll workers reasonable opportunities to split shifts.<sup>37</sup>

- Make Election Day a school holiday. This would enable eligible students, teachers, and school staff to more easily serve as poll workers.<sup>38</sup>
- Explore offering free child care services on the days that people serve as poll workers. As stated in a prior CAP issue brief: “Child care services should be conveniently located at or near polling places if space permits and must comply with public health guidelines, including guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention regarding child care programs.”<sup>39</sup>
- Arrange for national or local celebrities, sports figures, or respected community leaders to appear in PSAs or other outreach aimed at recruiting poll workers. These high-profile individuals could host online sessions explaining the crucial role of poll workers in our democracy.<sup>40</sup>
- Relax or eliminate service requirements that would prevent otherwise qualified individuals from filling poll worker shortages, such as requirements that poll workers be registered for a minimum amount of time in the precinct in which they serve. This would increase the pool of eligible poll workers at a time when the pandemic is making it difficult to find enough people.<sup>41</sup>
- When sending voter-related materials or tax-related mailings to people, government officials should also include information about how to become a poll worker.<sup>42</sup>
- Make extra efforts to recruit poll workers who are bilingual and/or are members of underrepresented or underserved communities, including communities of color and the disability community.<sup>43</sup> Having a diverse set of poll workers can help make voters feel more comfortable with the voting process and help sensitize other poll workers to voters’ needs.
- Recruit ride-sharing companies to provide free or significantly discounted transportation to poll workers. This is especially important in places where poll workers may not have their own transportation or access to public transportation.<sup>44</sup>
- Honor poll workers with letters of appreciation from government officials. These could be published prominently online, in the local newspaper, and/or given to local television and radio stations.<sup>45</sup>

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## Recommendations for for-profit businesses

For-profit businesses can play a major role in recruiting poll workers, especially as many state and local governments are faced with limited resources. Businesses should consider undertaking the following actions:

- Encourage younger employees and others who are at low risk of developing severe illness from COVID-19 to serve as poll workers. These employees should be given paid time off for mandatory poll worker training and for serving as poll workers as well as further incentives for their service, such as extra pay, gift cards, or other rewards.<sup>46</sup> For example, clothing retailer Old Navy announced that it will compensate store associates who serve as poll workers with eight hours of pay, in addition to any pay they may earn from local jurisdictions.<sup>47</sup>
- During the pandemic and economic recession, contact furloughed employees about opportunities to serve as poll workers. However, businesses must ensure that poll worker compensation does not jeopardize eligibility to receive unemployment benefits.<sup>48</sup>
- Businesses should “adopt” a polling place. This would encourage employees to work together in a community-oriented spirit to successfully staff a polling place.<sup>49</sup>
- Find notable ways to recognize employees who serve as poll workers. For example, companies could post names and photos of poll workers at the workplace or honor them in a companywide email or gathering.<sup>50</sup>
- Offer free, accessible child care for employees serving as poll workers, which could greatly expand the pool of potential poll workers. As stated in a prior CAP issue brief: “Ideally, child care services would be conveniently located—at polling locations if space permits. But such services must comply with public health guidelines and applicable state law.”<sup>51</sup>
- Corporate executives and high-profile managers should consider serving as poll workers. This could help motivate employees to do the same.<sup>52</sup>
- Offer company products or services to the general public that would make it easier to serve as a poll worker. For example, ride-share, bike-share, or scooter-share companies could offer free transportation to poll workers, especially for polling locations that may not be near public transportation.<sup>53</sup>

- Help pay for PSAs or advertisements about the importance of becoming a poll worker and create links on company websites where employees can easily access poll worker information. Furthermore, businesses should use company property to advertise about how to become a poll worker—for example, on a storefront or on company vehicles.<sup>54</sup>
- Invite election officials to speak with company employees about how to become a poll worker and the duties involved. This could include demonstrations of polling equipment and other important aspects.<sup>55</sup>
- Encourage tech-savvy employees to become poll workers, as they are in high demand, especially with newer voting machines being used in many jurisdictions.<sup>56</sup>
- Start a friendly competition with other local businesses to see who can generate the most poll workers. Moreover, businesses should find a way to publicize the results, which could be shared with local media.<sup>57</sup>

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## Recommendations for professional associations

Professional associations are composed of organizational or individual members, many of which can lead efforts to recruit poll workers during the pandemic. Associations should consider undertaking the following actions:

- Encourage members of the association, especially those at low risk of developing severe illness from COVID-19, to serve as poll workers. Associations are often civic-minded, and members may want to give back to the community by helping to ensure that state and local election processes run smoothly.<sup>58</sup>
- Agree to “adopt” a polling place by staffing it with association members. This would encourage members to work together on the frontlines of democracy.<sup>59</sup>
- Help spread the word about the important role that poll workers play in a free and fair election. Use associations’ websites or written materials to compellingly communicate the recruitment message to the public and to encourage members—especially organizational members—to do the same.

- Join a larger national recruitment effort with like-minded associations to help recruit poll workers. For example, the American Constitution Society in 2018 recruited its members to be poll workers as a member of All Voting is Local, a collaborative campaign of national civil rights organizations.<sup>60</sup>
- Help lead a local, community-based committee to recruit poll workers. Given the fact that many associations have local prominence, they can encourage other community actors—such as houses of worship, nonprofits, businesses, and cultural organizations—to join an organized poll worker recruitment effort.<sup>61</sup>
- Associations that include members such as attorneys and certified public accountants—who must fulfill continuing education requirements—should offer credits to members who serve as poll workers.<sup>62</sup> For example, in Nebraska, the Elections Division of the secretary of state’s office partnered with the Nebraska State Bar Association, the Nebraska Board of Public Accountancy, and the Nebraska Society of Certified Public Accountants Society to offer members 1 1/2 hours of free continuing education credits for their poll worker service.<sup>63</sup>
- Sponsor a contest among members, whether they be individual or organizational members, and award prizes for the top poll worker performers. The aim would be to see which members could devote the most time to poll working—or, perhaps more importantly, which members could recruit the largest number of poll workers.
- Organize an event where an election official speaks with association members about the duties of poll workers and describes how to get involved. This could include demonstrations of polling equipment and other important aspects.<sup>64</sup>
- Encourage business members to offer their products or services that make it easier to serve as a poll worker. For example, ride-share companies could offer free transportation to poll workers, especially for polling locations that may not be near public transportation.

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## Recommendations for political parties

Political parties have a role to play in recruiting poll workers, as the vast majority of states require a specific political party makeup of poll workers to help ensure fairness.<sup>65</sup> Political party leaders should consider undertaking the following actions:

- Political party leaders—at the national, state, or local levels—should encourage party members to become poll workers. Of course, they must at all times communicate the message that when performing poll worker duties, party members must act in a strictly nonpartisan manner.<sup>66</sup>
- When political parties are recruiting volunteers for traditional get-out-the-vote efforts or voter protection efforts, they should also consider educating people about the importance of serving as a poll worker. Some party members may prefer activities associated with serving at a polling place instead of partisan activities.
- Political parties often have robust and creative ways to communicate with party members, including through websites and mobile apps. They should use these powerful platforms to inform party members about the importance of serving as a poll worker, especially as many party members are likely unfamiliar with laws that require a balanced party makeup of poll workers.

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## Recommendations for high schools

In some jurisdictions, people as young as 16 can serve as poll workers. Provided that they are not at high risk from COVID-19 and exercise precautions, high school students can help make a difference in November by serving as poll workers and recruiting their peers to do so as well. High schools and high school students should consider undertaking the following actions:

- High schools should take advantage of state laws that allow them to encourage younger poll workers to sign up. Forty-five states and the District of Columbia allow those under the age of 18 to become poll workers.<sup>67</sup>
- High schools in jurisdictions that already have programs designed to recruit young people to be poll workers should formalize partnerships and share information with their students. Chicago, Illinois, and Montgomery County, Maryland, run two notable youth election worker recruitment programs.<sup>68</sup>
- Election officials should provide information on poll-working jobs to young people who are looking for extra money this fall.
- Election officials should partner with school districts, as well as civics, elections, and social studies teachers, to recruit their students this fall.

- School districts can provide credit hours for students who train and serve as poll workers. Many school districts require students to complete a number of community service or service-learning hours before graduation.
- Election officials can offer letters of recommendation to students who serve as poll workers—which will be useful for the college and trade school application season.
- Election officials should partner with schools to amplify civic engagement programs aimed at young people. Many states have Democracy MVP efforts that can be easily amplified to reach more young people.<sup>69</sup>
- Social media platforms such as Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram should be heavily used to share messaging that encourages young people to become poll workers.<sup>70</sup> Many digital and social media efforts have also been created and targeted specifically toward recruiting young poll workers, including Poll Hero and Power the Polls.<sup>71</sup>
- High school sports teams, schools, and community youth programs can adopt a precinct and encourage participants to staff the polls.
- Schools across a school district, county, or city can create poll worker recruitment contests to get teens engaged and excited about becoming a poll worker. These campaigns could be geared around voter registration deadlines or other markers.<sup>72</sup>
- Schools should amplify celebrity influencers—especially Millennials and Gen Zers—as they can find creative ways to bring attention to upcoming elections and message the importance of poll workers.<sup>73</sup>
- Schools should prioritize recruitment of bilingual and ethnically diverse students, including students who are legal permanent residents where eligible. Younger students from multilingual households often also serve as translators for parents and family members, so they have experience guiding others through processes such as voting that can sometimes be complicated for the unfamiliar. The Minnesota Student Election Judge Program and the Montgomery County, Maryland, Future Vote program have each had success gaining traction with bilingual students.<sup>74</sup>

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## Recommendations for colleges and universities

College students can play a critical role in our democracy by serving as poll workers. With older poll workers disproportionately at risk from severe COVID-19 complications, college students can step into the role to help ensure the smooth administration of elections—provided that they are healthy, are low risk, and exercise precautions leading up to the election. Colleges and universities can also serve as important recruiting partners for states and jurisdictions in need of poll workers. Colleges and college students should consider undertaking the following actions:

- Colleges and universities should use their built-in communications channels to share information about becoming a poll worker with students. Nearly 20 million students attend colleges in the United States, and schools can amplify messaging about election work to incentivize students to fill nationwide vacancies.<sup>75</sup>
- Colleges should establish or take advantage of existing poll worker initiatives, working in partnership with election officials to recruit and train students as poll workers.<sup>76</sup>
- Election officials should work with colleges and universities across the country to share poll worker recruitment information with students participating in distance learning in their home communities. Due to COVID-19, some college students will remain home for at least the first semester of instruction; but resources on becoming an election worker, or digital recruitment efforts such as Power the Polls, can let students anywhere find out what the rules are to serve as a poll worker in their communities.<sup>77</sup>
- Colleges should consider offering credit—either academic course credit or credit toward community service requirements—to students enrolled in the fall 2020 semester if they get trained and serve as poll workers for the November 2020 election.
- Institutions should offer excused absences for students who serve as poll workers, where necessary.
- Schools should encourage tech savvy students to sign up as poll workers, as their skills would be useful in addressing challenges that might arise with new voting machines.
- Schools should encourage multilingual students to serve as poll workers and provide language services that are highly sought after at polling places in many communities around the country.

- Colleges and universities should partner with fraternities, sororities, and other campus organizations to use their normally robust communication networks among student bodies to share information on the importance of becoming a poll worker and where to sign up. Organizations on many campuses increase their focus on voter registration and civic participation during election years, and they can be encouraged to include election work in that engagement.<sup>78</sup>
- Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have a unique and important role to play in encouraging students to become poll workers. HBCUs have a history of both leading the broader community on civic engagement and partnering with student organizations on their campuses to increase engagement on election issues.
- In particular, Black fraternities, sororities, and other campus organizations can share information on how poll worker shortages affect the availability of polling locations in Black communities and can encourage those who are at lower risk of contracting the virus to serve as poll workers.<sup>79</sup>
- Students currently participating in initiatives that match them with nonprofits and government entities needing additional help during COVID-19 response and recovery efforts could be redirected during the election to become poll workers.

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## Recommendations for nonprofits and philanthropic organizations

Nonprofit organizations with the means to do so can have a sizable impact on poll worker recruitment. Additionally, philanthropic organizations can use their resources and networks to ensure that polling places are fully staffed in November. Nonprofits and philanthropic organizations should consider undertaking the following actions:

- The nonprofit sector can use its strong relationships with Americans all around the country to promote becoming a poll worker. Millions of Americans interact with nonprofits to connect with a diverse array of cultural, social, religious, political, and civic activities in their communities.
- Nonprofits can take the lead in forming collaborations across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors to target resources and attention to filling the poll worker gap.

- Philanthropic institutions with the means to do so can boost the search for poll workers by funding efforts to educate the public on the ways in which they can become poll workers and by funding efforts geared toward poll worker recruitment. Many foundations already engage in voter registration drives and support nonpartisan get-out-the-vote efforts; poll worker recruitment could fit neatly into that work.
- Nonprofit service providers at the state and local levels can include information on how to sign up to be a poll worker, along with other information on voter registration that many share with their partners or their clients.
- Nonprofit hospitals can play an important role as trusted communicators on the need for poll workers and how to administer elections while also maintaining health and safety.

## Intersections between poll worker recruitment and the fight for racial justice

The continuing police reform and racial justice movements are galvanizing Americans from all walks of life to engage in the civic and political process. Studies have shown that voter registration surged during recent protests due to increased awareness of issues and strategic outreach to communities that tied the importance of voting and civic participation to activism.<sup>80</sup> Racial justice and civil rights organizations are harnessing the moment to engage around poll worker shortages that disproportionately threaten the operations of polling places in communities of color. Efforts such as More Than a Vote—a collaboration between athletes and celebrities, including LeBron James, and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund—aim to both fight voter suppression and increase the number of poll workers in polling locations in Black communities.<sup>81</sup>

Wisconsin's primary election debacle showed the dangers of understaffed polling places coupled with an election system unprepared to process a surge of mail-in ballots.<sup>82</sup> As civil rights leaders such as the NAACP Legal Defense Fund's Sherrilyn Ifill have pointed out, COVID-19 is being used as a tool to aid voter suppression, as some states are making it harder, not easier, to vote.<sup>83</sup> One way that she suggests Americans can protect this election and ensure that voting rights are protected is to sign up to be a poll worker.<sup>84</sup>

In another example, Kentucky's primary election saw the state reduce the number of polling places in the state from 3,700 to fewer than 200, reducing many polling places in communities of color.<sup>85</sup> While turnout surged, many voters remain worried about the availability of in-person voting options for the fall election. Local racial justice groups are teaming up to call for more polling places in their neighborhoods, but they also need additional poll workers to staff them.<sup>86</sup>

It is also worth noting that the COVID-19 pandemic presents additional risks for communities of color. The CDC continues to report that people with serious chronic medical conditions are more likely to get very sick if they contract the virus.<sup>87</sup> Due to the compounding effects of existing inequities, higher rates of these conditions are often found in communities of color—including among young people.<sup>88</sup> Yet in any poll worker recruitment efforts, it is important to only recruit those who are not at risk of severe complications from the virus. Additionally, jurisdictions must ensure that poll workers perform their duties under the safest possible conditions with all essential precautions, including the provision of necessary PPE for each poll worker.

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## Recommendations for religious communities

Religious communities often play a central role in encouraging Americans to participate in civic and political processes. People of faith and faith leaders can help fill the poll worker shortage and should consider undertaking the following actions:

- Religious leaders and houses of worship traditionally engaged in activities that educate their communities on voting and elections can use that same infrastructure to encourage community members to become poll workers.<sup>89</sup>
- Since many houses of worship have now moved almost exclusively to virtual services due to COVID-19, they can use their increased digital reach to share information about the need for poll workers in their localities.
- Religious communities that have communal spaces currently unoccupied due to COVID-19—such as community centers or school facilities—could work with election officials to use applicable spaces for polling places and encourage their members to become poll workers.
- Religious communities serving populations—such as communities of color—that might more heavily rely on in-person voting can also play an important role in advocating for members to become poll workers in order to help keep local polling places open during the election.
- Religious communities can encourage civic participation and assist their fellow citizens in participating in the electoral process by adopting a polling place and encouraging congregants to serve as poll workers.

# Conclusion

Poll worker shortages represent a growing threat to American elections. In recent months, election officials representing jurisdictions nationwide have raised alarms over possible poll worker shortages due to the novel coronavirus as well as the negative impacts such shortages will have on free and fair elections. To ensure that polling places are fully staffed in November, broad coalitions comprised of civically minded individuals, organizations, and other entities must engage in robust poll worker recruitment and retainment efforts to ensure the safety of our democracy.

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## Endnotes

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