

# ASSESSMENT OF 2020 ELECTIONS, STATEWIDE, STATE OF HAWAII, DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, OFFICE OF HOMELAND SECURITY

State of Hawaii  
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## FINAL ASSESSMENT REPORT



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## *Summary*

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This is the Final Assessment Report concerning the State of Hawaii Primary Election and General Election of 2020, in addition to the Pre-Primary Assessment Report, Post-Primary Assessment Report, and the Pre-General Assessment Report previously submitted.

This Assessment summarizes all of the on-site visits, the numerous video and tele conferences conducted with various election officials as well as agency representatives outside of the official election administration, yet completely involved to offer support for the election.

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## *Assessment Recommendation Summary*

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### *Overall Success*

The overall transition for the State of Hawaii from traditional in-person polling location voting to a vote by mail system was a tremendous success. This success was demonstrated through the enormous amount of election workers hired as well as the positivity received from the public and the press during both the Primary and General Election.

### *Drop Boxes and Voter Service Centers*

The new “polling places” accomplished their goals in providing quick and easy access for ballots to be cast as well as offering in person voting opportunities for those voters who needed additional assistance.

### *Communication Plan*

Effectively communicating the election story is a challenge for every election. 2020 was an even greater challenge with all of the changes made to the voting process. The paid and earned media was well received and well communicated in the education of the voters for the upcoming elections.

### *Ballot Security*

Ensuring the security of an election is a never-ending process and safeguarding the ballot required additional resources at all levels. The ballot traveled to and through a number of new obstacles and successfully returned home to be counted. Keeping up with ballot security needs will continue to be a challenge in elections to come.

## ***Procedure Manual***

Detailing the entire process of an election is a critical component in accomplishing the goal of administering a successful election. Improving upon the existing procedures and clearly defining the process through a manual emphasizing the State's responsibilities as well as each County's responsibilities will help to create even more successful elections in the future.

## ***Legislation***

Keeping solid deadlines and preventing potential voter fraud will continue to be a top priority through the legislative process. Educating lawmakers on the election data from ballots cast, to ballot pick up times, to movements of voters will be keys in continuing to share knowledge and ensure cooperative legislation.

## ***Software and Hardware***

Technology is continually changing, and the State and Counties must adapt. New counting machines and transitioning software to be more vote by mail focused will be challenging over the next year, however the outcomes will increase the efficiency of future elections.

## ***Fusion Center Online Sit-Room***

New resources and new opportunities are available for election officials and other state and federal agencies. Utilizing and implementing these resources will be necessary to keep the security of the election a top priority.

## ***Election Scenario Preparedness***

Preparing for the unknown is a constant challenge for election officials. These challenges can be minimized by continuing to prepare and developing plans and policies for when an unknown issue arises.

## ***Agency Cooperation***

Communication from and to local, state, and federal agencies can be difficult and intimidating. Working to create a plan of how the cooperation should work can be done through constant education and training.

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## *Drop Boxes and Voter Service Centers*

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Determining the number and locations of Drop Boxes across each County took considerable time and effort by election officials to make the best decision for anticipating the needs of the voters. After the Primary Election, a number of additional Drop Boxes were deployed by various Counties. The needs of the voters will continue to drive the need for more or less Drop Boxes as well as the locations. Voting trends will continue to influence Drop Boxes, based off of the number of ballots deposited. The keys for the future include ensuring that if a change is made from a previous election, then election officials must clearly communicate with the voters about the new location and the rationale for the change. This will help to ensure that the public is educated on the voting process.

With the move to a vote by mail system versus the traditional in-person voting, Hawaii has seen a tremendous movement by voters embracing the mail process. Even with nearly all voters casting a ballot through the mail or a Drop Box, there will still be a number of voters who may have voter registration issues or who still want to vote in person. The amount of staffing at a Voter Service Center was very successful during the Primary Election as there was a lower turnout. During the General Election, more voters utilized the Voter Service Centers causing a strain on the staffing levels. There were a number of factors related to the Voter Service Centers. Covid-19 caused the need for additional spacing between staff and limited the amount of space for voters to register and to cast a ballot. A General Election is a completely different election compared to a Primary Election. Voters are much more likely to vote in a General Election than a Primary Election. As Election Day nears and the clock is ticking until polls close, a large number of voters tend to finally decide they need to vote and create longer than normal lines near poll closing time. Hawaii was no different than nearly all states across the country with longer than normal lines forming near the poll closing time.

Drop Boxes and Voter Service Centers will continue to be challenged for the number and location and staffing levels; however, election officials have long understood the need to serve as many voters as possible with limited resources. Change is inevitable and as long as educational programs and communication releases are managed, the public will have the knowledge and understanding for when change happens.

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## *Communication Plan*

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Communicating with the public, the press, and others is a non-stop process during an election cycle. Effectively sharing what is happening and what the processes are can go a long way in ensuring that the correct information is broadcast to the people. This can be very challenging in today's society with the challenges of social media and the vast spreading of "disinformation." The goal must be to clearly educate the public as often as possible and be prepared for when confusion and misinformation begin to spread. An indepth and effective communciation plan is an absolute must to stay ahead of election information.

The difficulties with state-wide press releases and press conferences is that each County has their own processes in certain areas. These differences must be communicated effectively and clearly so that voters of each County are not left with confusion on what is happening in their County versus another County. There isn't an easy solution; however, efforts can be made to ensure that the misinformation is not coming from election officials. This can be rectified with constant coordination between the State and the Counties and vice versa. Sharing of a communication plan with each entity ensures that more eyes will read the press releases before they are published allowing for corrections to County specific activities.

The news media is always going to look for the "gotcha moment," however the news media also wants to be a resource for the voters to share and gain election knowledge. Building relationships with the media helps to gain a rapport that benefits both parties to be able to share information and ultimately publish the correct facts and procedures for whatever issue may arise. This will begin to create a mutual repect for one another allowing for a successful sharing of information that will ultimately benefit the voters in their understanding of the election process.

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## *Ballot Security*

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Ballots are required to travel from the printing company, to the USPS, to the voter, to the USPS or Drop Box, to the election office, to the counting center. This is a unique process for the ballot to travel and can cause a number of opportunities for disruption.

Ballot tracking can be an enormously useful tool for the voters as well as the election officials. By utilizing readily available resources from the USPS as well as various election ballot mailing vendors, Hawaii can provide additional resources to all involved to help track where a ballot is and where it has been. These types of

services to the voters have been successfully used in various states, especially those who have been solely using vote by mail procedures. The additional costs that would be incurred by the State and Counties would easily be offset by the additional security that would be communicated to the public about the safety and location of a ballot.

The movement of a blank ballot, and especially a voted ballot, go through a number of different hands. Protecting the ballot is a primary concern to try and avoid any potential voter fraud from taking place with a ballot. Election officials must have the resources available to communicate effectively what the ballot security process entails. The public needs to understand the precautions that election officials implement when a ballot is handled. Whether it is the collections from the Drop Boxes, or the opening of a returned ballot, these procedures must be able to be easily communicated with all involved to help ensure that the integrity of the ballot is preserved. Being open and transparent about the paths of a ballot will help to provide increased confidence in the electoral process.

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## *Procedure Manual*

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A clear and concise path is paramount for a successful election to be administered. This can only be achieved through a well thought out and executed policy and procedure manual. The need for such a comprehensive manual is clear from both a State and County perspective. The State has specific duties to administer and each County also has specific duties with the goal for each to meld together precisely to create a road map for a well-executed election.

The processes that are the responsibility of the State must be understood and acknowledged by the Counties, and in turn, the responsibilities of the Counties must be considered in the overall operation of the election. Each County has unique procedures to achieve the same goal. The State and Counties can benefit from understanding how the others are operating to gain additional insight on the variations of accomplishing the various election laws and rules of the State.

A Procedure Manual that clearly outlines each entity's requirements as well as how they accomplish those requirements needs to be written in the form of a manual. This Procedure Manual will allow each County to have a clear path to administer an election. All Counties are not the same and should not be treated as the same. Certain procedures in one County may not be best suited for another County. However, some election procedures may be better executed as a whole versus by individual Counties. Determining which election procedures can be implemented as a whole versus individually can only be considered if a Procedure Manual encompassing the State activities as well as each County's activity is created.

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## *Legislation*

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Election officials and elected officials did a great job creating a vote by mail system for Hawaii in 2018-2019 to prepare for the 2020 elections. Of all the laws and rules that needed to be changed and updated, probably the most important of them all was the hard fast law that all ballots must be received by 7pm on Election Day. As we have seen across the country over the past six weeks, other states have struggled with lawsuits and confusion as to when the last day to accept ballots would be. Keeping the 7pm on Election Day to receive ballots law will help to keep Hawaii above the political battles that other states have had to endure.

More than likely there will be potential legislation to require Counties to have “x” number of Drop Box locations and possibly “x” number of Voter Service Centers within each County. Counties need the ability to increase, decrease, and move both Drop Boxes and Voter Service Centers as their County needs change. State-wide requirements wouldn’t be in the best interest of individual Counties. The State and Counties must be ready to share ballot data and voting statistics at each Drop Box and Voter Service Center detailing how many ballots cast, the times they were delivered and further justifications on choices of how many and where they are each located.

A possible piece of legislation that should be considered is a clear understanding that a voter’s signature is a confidential record and not available for release to the public. A voter’s signature is now one of the key components of verifying that a ballot was cast by the voter. Ensuring that the digital signature file is confidential, it becomes one of the ways to avoid the ability for voter fraud to take place.

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## *Software and Hardware*

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During 2021, the State will begin the process of upgrading the vote counting hardware and software systems. This upgrade should provide the State with the needed resources to more efficiently conduct the counting of ballots for upcoming elections for years to come. Communication, education, and training will be key factors leading into the 2022 elections. Involving County officials and election staff in this process will be important for a successful transition.

Consideration should also be made regarding the voter registration management system to implement more automation for a vote by mail system. Currently, the system is focused on polling place and in-person voting. Upgrading the system to focus on vote by mail procedures should create additional efficiencies to help



County election staff process ballots in a quicker manner. The knowledge and data gained by the State and Counties after the 2020 election is very valuable in the implementation of new software programming. This is the perfect opportunity to implement the necessary vote by mail software upgrades in preparation for the 2022 elections.

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### *Fusion Center Sit-Room*

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The Fusion Center facilitates the sharing of data from local, state, and federal agencies. Since 2017 when the Department of Homeland Security designated elections as a critical infrastructure, there has been a tremendous number of resources and funds designated for election administration. This new opportunity has given election officials the needed means to increase security measures around the entire election process. Hawaii has provided this opportunity to the State election office and County election offices during 2020. However, a clear and concise policy for how to utilize the Sit-Room has not been established. During both the Primary Election and the General Election in 2020 Hawaii did not receive any cyber threat that led to any over the top security breach or concern.

The need to establish an educational plan for the election officials is definitely needed based off of the use of the Sit-Room during 2020. A clear policy stating who is responsible for sharing election activities needs to be developed. In addition, defining in broad language what needs to be shared and what does not, needs to be shared with all involved.

With education and a policy on what is to be shared within the Sit-Room, it will provide election officials and other agencies a partnership to keep everyone informed of election activity concerns. As we saw in 2020, this is not happening. There will be more buy-in to the process with education and understanding as this is a critical step in ensuring that the security of the election is achieved.

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### *Election Scenario Preparedness*

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Election officials understand that during every election there are going to be a number of issues that arise in the lead up to and including Election Day. Experience can provide nearly all of the tools to successfully navigate through election irregularities. Issues out of an election official's control are generally the main concerns that happen during an election. Preparing for the unknown issues that may arise is the challenge.

Implementing an Election Preparedness Plan would help to prepare election officials for potential issues that may not have happened in the past. Creating a plan that utilizes issues that other states have had to successfully manage is the best way to start preparing for the unknown. This Plan can be broken down by the various areas of administering an election and include possible solutions, possible draft press releases, and ways to potentially avoid the situation in the first place.

This Plan would allow State and County election officials with a game plan to resolve these potential issues in a much quicker manner. By having a Plan in place, they will be able to save a tremendous amount of time and resources by already having some possible solutions in place before the election. Who to contact; what to say; and how to fix would be the beginning components of creating such a Plan to be as prepared as possible for the unknowns.

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### *Agency Cooperation*

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As the electoral process has evolved, there have been so many new resources available for election officials that it can be overwhelming at times. Knowing who to contact and when about various election issues has been hard to determine. When local governments have to deal with the State government, and then with the Federal government, it can be intimidating because election officials may lack the law enforcement knowledge to understand how other agencies can help.

Hawaii does a great job of providing introductions of election officials to various other departments including, DOJ, DHS, FBI, CISA, State Police, State IT, USPS, and others. It is clear that all of these agencies want to offer assistance to election officials, however it seems like the part that is lacking is the link to connect them all together. This missing link may be intimidation, may be a lack of education, or may be just simple confusion on what information needs to be shared.

A possible solution to building better agency cooperation with election officials is the designation of one contact for any and all issues related to elections during an election. If one person was identified as the go to contact for all State and County election officials, issues may be shared more freely. This would also work the other way in allowing all of the non-election agencies to utilize this one person to explain and educate the election officials on the concerns that each agency may have. Communication is absolutely key in having successful agency cooperation from all involved. The pieces for successful cooperation are all in place. The challenge now becomes melding all of these agencies together so that no information, insignificant or not, is not lost due to inadequate communication.

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## *Conclusion*

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Throughout this Assessment there has been great assistance from election officials and other agencies to help in the process of reviewing the new vote by mail procedures in Hawaii. There are always going to be ways to improve an election by analyzing what took place and maybe how things could have been accomplished differently. We have seen how Counties adapted from various challenges in the Primary Election and made those changes for the General Election to ensure that the voters are provided a safe and secure election.

Election officials have always had to deal with issues out of their control and 2020 was no different. A global pandemic wreaked havoc on the election process across the entire United States. Hawaii benefited greatly by already developing plans to move from in person voting to vote by mail. The additional challenges faced by election officials was met head on and were extremely successful in navigating the challenges of Covid-19 as well as an entirely new voting system. The citizens of Hawaii should be proud of their election officials and all of the local, state, and federal government agencies that assisted to make the 2020 elections as successful as they were.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to meet and work with so many dedicated government officials as well as the steadfast election workers across the state over the past year. It is always reassuring knowing that our American democracy will continue to be a system that we can all be proud of with so many committed election officials.

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## *About the Author*

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The Gant Group Team is led by Jason Gant with extensive experience in election administration, vote by mail procedures, election hardware, election software, and overall project management provide Hawaii with the most effective team of election administration.



Former Secretary of State **Jason Gant** provides an election administration expert to the Team. Gant led the first in the nation use of the Department of Defense common access card to assist servicemen and women around the globe to vote. This new voting initiative successfully allowed servicemen and women to be able to register to vote, request an absentee ballot, receive an absentee ballot and mark an absentee ballot in seconds. This is only possible by utilizing the security of the common access card for validation to verify our overseas voters and turn a 60-day process into a less

than 5-minute transaction. The state-of-the-art voter registration system implemented by Gant included the highest level of internal and external security protocols, thus becoming one of the most secure election administration systems. Gant has the internal knowledge of working in and with government agencies from an election official's point of view that will assist in completing the research, analytics, and education aspects of this project. Implemented numerous election strategies and programs, including a voter look-up ap, a new voter registration system, an e-pollbook solution, a military voting system, an election night reporting system, an election cyber-security protocol system, as well as a host of other systems not related to elections. Developed election performance plans and budgets for each division within the Secretary of State's office during times of both increasing and decreasing funding authority, as well as skill in long range planning and for acquisition, physical and financial resources, and policy and strategic development. Prepared election research, reports, and options for local election officials, legislative committees, and Board of Election members on upcoming initiatives, as well as effectively defended policies, programs, decisions, or points of view in the face of heavy criticism in unstructured settings and public hearings. Knowledge of HAVA, MOVE, and other election laws, regulations, and legal decisions. Experience in the administration, management, or legal oversight of elections. Also served as the National Association of Secretaries of State Treasurer and Secretary as well as Chairman of the Business Services and the Elections Committees.