Joint Oversight Hearing
Senate Committee on Elections and Constitutional
Amendments
Assembly Committee on Elections and Redistricting

Colorado Model of Elections:
Report from California Observers
10 am State Capitol, Room 3191

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Testimony prepared by

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Future of
CALIFORNIA
ELECTIONS

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Good morning Chair Allen, Chair Ridley-Thomas, and Committee Members,

I am Astrid Garcia Ochoa, Deputy Director for Future of California Elections. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today and to share my observations of the recent Denver election on May 5, 2015.

I was in Denver as part of a two-day event, called "The City and County of Denver's Municipal Election: The Power of Partnership" hosted by Denver Elections and their vendor.  The first day of the event consisted of presentations on the Colorado Voting Model and the new voting system and the second day participants went into the community to observe the municipal election. In attendance to this event were 150 individual guests, representing 55 organizations and jurisdictions from across the US.

**Colorado's Voting Model:**

On Day 1, Amber McReynolds, Director of Elections for the City and County of Denver, discussed the elements of the Colorado voting model. The Colorado voting model as we experienced on May 5 was created by HB 1303 passed in 2013. The bill changed the way Colorado votes and consists of proactive list maintenance, voter registration modernization, a new ballot delivery model and Voting Service and Polling Centers (VSPC).

Colorado is proactive in its list maintenance to keep accurate voter registration rolls and reduce the number of undelivered ballots. Colorado has a statewide database, SCORE, since at least 2008, they are a member of the Electronic Registration Information Center since 2012 and it is my understanding that they use the National Change of Address database, maintained by the US postal service, to clean lists on a monthly basis.

Colorado's voter registration modernization includes eliminating a 30-day precinct residency requirement and replacing this with a 22-day state residency requirement. Additionally, Colorado has same day voter registration allowing those eligible to register to vote up to and on Election Day.

The Colorado model also changed the way voters experience the election by their ballot delivery. Every registered voter receives a ballot in the mail and has several options to cast their ballot. Voters can return their ballot by mail, at a drop-box, at a drive-thru drop off or in-person at a vote center.

# Astrid Garcia Ochoa Testimony
## May 27, 2015

The VSPCs provide voters with several services, including same day voter registration, ballot replacement, accessible in-person voting, and they also serve as mail-ballot drop off sites.

**Voting Service and Polling Center (VSPC) Observations:**

On Election Day I visited five of seven VSPCs. The Denver Elections Division headquarters began operations as a full service vote center on April 20, a full two weeks before the election. The other six vote centers opened one week before the election on April 27. The hours of operation were 10am to 6pm weekdays; 10am to 2pm the Saturday before the election, and 7am to 7pm Election Day. Headquarters had a slight variation in their hours.
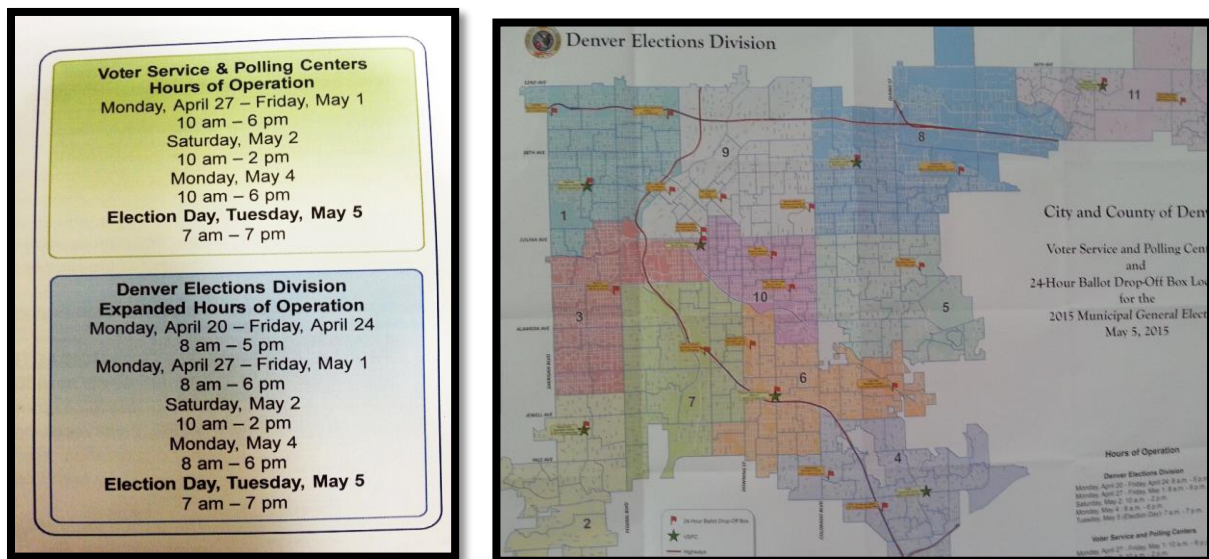
Photos of VSPC hours of operation and Map of Denver Council Districts taken by Astrid Garcia Ochoa

The VSPCs I visited included a vote center at a police station and at community centers. There was also a vote center at a church but I did not have the opportunity to visit this site. Vote centers were located a short walking distance from public transportation and seemed to be spread throughout the city in each council district.

When you entered the vote center there was one main table with several laptops and a ballot-on-demand printer. The laptops were all networked to the statewide database to access voter files real-time. There was also a separate table with two ballot boxes, one for in-person voting and another for mail-voters dropping off ballots. Additionally, there were

five accessible voting booths each with a tablet and printer, eight traditional voting booths for paper voting, and two traditional voting booths which were accessible.



Photos of VSPCs, Voter Card and Ballot Boxes taken by Astrid Garcia Ochoa

The general process I observed was that the voter would arrive and go to the check-in desk. At the check-in desk they could register to vote, get a replacement ballot or check-in to vote. Once they checked-in to vote they were directed to a second poll worker, a technician, who could provide them with a paper ballot or an electronic ballot. The poll worker had the ability to print their ballot with a ballot-on-demand printer or program their ballot on a Voter Card, which is the size of a credit card. The voter would then take their ballot to the appropriate booth.

# Astrid Garcia Ochoa Testimony
## May 27, 2015

The voting booths set up for electronic voting contained a tablet and printer. The tablets are marking tools; therefore they do not save the votes cast information. The final step was for the voter to print their ballot and cast the printed ballot in the appropriate ballot box.
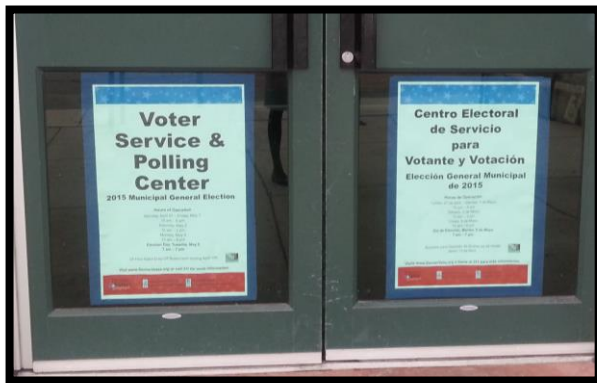


Photos of open floor plan at VSPC, accessible voting booth, bilingual signage taken by Astrid Garcia Ochoa

The VSPCs were also set up to assist voters with special needs. The physical space inside of the vote centers were spacious and had an open floor plan. A disability rights advocate in our group noted that the voting booths needed to offer more privacy for voters with disabilities, as well as supply paddles to assist with marking the ballot in addition to the joystick currently provided.

The VSPCs also offered assistance to voters that were limited English proficient. Denver is covered for Spanish language assistance under Section 203 of the federal Voting Rights Act, therefore signs and election materials were in Spanish. I also noticed in at least one vote center a bilingual poll worker wore a badge that identified them as a Spanish speaker. The size of the Spanish language signs varied depending on whether they used the same space as an English language sign. When the Spanish language sign was on its own, it was given the same formatting as the English signs. Denver Elections consults its community working group, ACESO, on Spanish language access issues.

Another element in vote centers was a wooden cabinet that contained all the ballot types pre-printed. This was the back-up system to continue the election should there be a power outage or technical issues. I learned that this cabinet facilitated the vote center model used before the current technology of ballot-on-demand was made available.
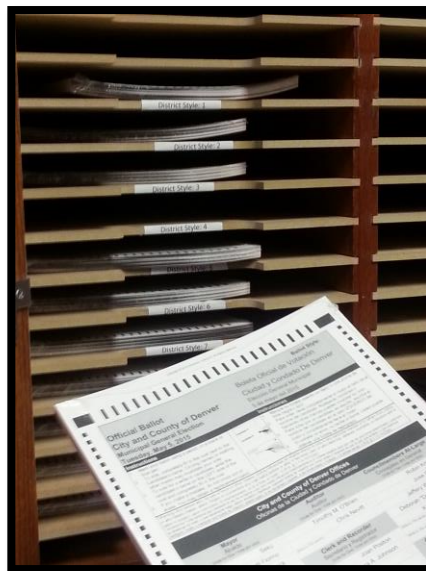


Photos of ballot storage cabinet and paper ballot taken by Astrid Garcia Ochoa

I observed very few voters throughout the day. On one occasion I observed a voter who had to update their voter registration and who chose to use the tablet voting to mark their ballot. This transaction took less than 15 minutes from checking-in to casting a ballot. There were no other voters in the vote center at the time. I also had the opportunity to observe a voter who was visually impaired. The voter was guided through the check-in station and then to the station to choose their voting method. The voter was pleased to learn that they could use a tablet to get an audio ballot. The voter walked out saying how much he enjoyed this new voting system. This transaction also took less than 15 minutes.

## Astrid Garcia Ochoa Testimony
## May 27, 2015

Of the voters I observed, there was no pattern whether a voter would choose one method of voting over another. I observed a young voter choose a paper ballot and an older voter choose tablet voting. I did not have the opportunity to observe a voter receive language assistance. Overall, voters were in and out of the vote centers within minutes, since there were not many voters present. Voters went through check-in quickly, where five poll workers stationed. However, some voters experienced a slight delay to receive their ballot, where there was only one technician was available to print the ballot-on-demand and hand voters their paper ballot or set them up on a tablet.

**Additional Methods to Cast a Ballot:**

In addition to the VSPCs, Denver voters also had two additional options to cast their ballots: drive-thru drop off sites and ballot drop-off boxes.



Photos of drive-thru ballot drop-off and ballot drop-off boxes taken by Astrid Garcia Ochoa

The drive-thru ballot drop-off sites were located outside of each vote center and had the same hours of operation. They had clear signage, a designated lane marked with cones, a tent to protect the poll workers, as well as a ballot box on a table. The voter would drive through the designated lane, for safety they had to pull up to the curb and park, the poll worker stood at the curb and received the ballot. The poll worker would then walk to the ballot box and allow the voter to see their ballot cast into the box. The poll worker would then return to the voter's car and hand the voter their "I Voted" sticker.

Denver Elections also has 24 ballot drop-off boxes that are permanent fixtures throughout the city. The drop-off boxes have 24-hour access, are bolted to the ground and located near 24-hour surveillance cameras. The addresses of the drop boxes are available on the Denver Elections home page. The boxes are located outside of the VSPCs, outside of libraries, near transit lines, near government buildings and even near cultural centers like the Denver Museum of Nature and Science.

## Astrid Garcia Ochoa Testimony
## May 27, 2015

As mentioned previously, there were few voters out on Election Day. Most of the activity I observed for the municipal election was occurring at the drive-thru locations outside of the VSPCs. I assume the drive-thru ballot drop off sites were especially popular because May 5 was a rainy day.

**Technology Observations:**

Denver's modern election experience is possible because of the software platform they developed in partnership with their vendor.  This was the featured technology at this event and it was the first municipal election in the nation using this comprehensive software package. My understanding of the technology is that it streamlines the election process by creating one system to run the entire election. This provides the ability to process the different voting options (mail voting and in-person voting), vote tabulation and reporting, all on a single unified database.

The Denver Elections experience also includes several other technology elements. Each step of the voting process described above used some technology to create a seamless experience for the voter. Each vote center was networked and had a server on site. The poll workers used electronic poll books to check voters in and register them on site. Their computers were networked to the statewide registration database. Voters, who preferred voting on paper, were able to request hard copies of their ballot because of the ballot-on-demand printer available on site. Voters, who preferred to vote on a tablet, were directed to use any of the five tablets available to them. The tablets were off-the shelf tablets but met the hardware and software specifications to work on the new system.

**Conclusion:**

Observing the Denver election was informative and inspiring, but the experience also raised many questions for me. I wanted to know what steps Colorado took to get where they are today, what were the building blocks, what communities were engaged to inform the new policies, how did they inform voters of the transition, what technology was required, and how much did it all cost, were among my many questions.

I did not get all my answers over a short trip, but here is what I learned. I learned Colorado's experience was not created overnight. What I observed over a two-day event was the result of several years of thoughtful work by many stakeholders. I learned from Coloradoans that there was wide support for the new policies because their electorate was already moving in the same direction. Counties, large and small, had high rates of mail

voting among their electorate. Colorado took on the modernization process as a step toward creating a uniform election experience for voters across the State.

I also learned that Denver is the standard but it is also the exception. Denver is a geographically compact county, at 153 square miles, and also has unique access to funding and technology that other counties do not have. Other Colorado counties are still trying to understand how to best implement and fund the new flexible voting options.

I learned that Colorado is still fine-tuning its model. Its first general election under the new policies was in November 2014 and resulted in several recommendations for Election 2016. These recommendations were made in a final report to the Colorado General Assembly in April 2015. The report calls for several technical and operational improvements to build an even better voter experience next election.

In closing, although I continue to have many questions, the Colorado experience left me with the knowledge that flexible voting options are possible given the right policies to develop those processes and the right elements of support. Colorado is clearly committed to offering its electorate voting options and is leading the way nationally to a modern election experience that puts the voter first.

I thank you for your time and am available to answer any questions.