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Poll workers prepare for March primary

By David Scholz



Seasonal clerk Bill Cahill tells poll workers about organizing the different ballot types available at the polls during a training session Feb. 7 at Veterans Memorial Building in Lafayette. Photo David Scholz

There's more than counting ballots at stake with elections these days; trust in the process that voters engage in is under scrutiny too.

On the front lines of that endeavor in Contra Costa County are thousands of poll workers who in February have been involved in required online and in-person training to help democracy go forward during the March 5 Primary Election.

Doug Ewert was among several dozen poll workers from the Lamorinda area who were on hand at the Veterans Memorial Building in Lafayette on Feb. 14 for one of the Elections Division's many hour-long training sessions being held around the county.

The fundamental idea of democracy motivated Ewert, participating in his first election as a poll worker, to step forward.

"I wanted to be part of the process," he said.

Lori Everett, another newcomer, expressed equal excitement about serving.

"Our volunteers are dedicated to doing their part in the community and are grateful to be a part of and learn more about the election process," said Jessamyn Hazzard, the county's Elections Services Supervisor.

The Election Division's goal is to have all 147 polling places in the county staffed with one inspector (the lead poll worker) and six clerks, bringing the total to 1,029 poll workers for the upcoming primary.

"We are on target to meet our goal; however, we do have vacancies in parts of the county," she said. "There are a wide variety of reasons, but it's mostly due to volunteers not interested in traveling far from their residence or unable to commit to a full 15-hour shift."

Hazzard also has been mindful of the news coverage about threats to poll workers and county and state election staff since the last election.

"We have not received a lot, but a few poll workers have shared their concerns about security. Mostly, poll workers are more interested in how to deescalate a difficult situation, which we do train [on] and remind them that their safety is our main priority," she said.

With the number of qualified political parties, with their own ballot and rules, and the variety of ballots having increased, Hazzard noted poll workers following procedures on Election Day is important.

"Our primary focus for poll worker training in the Presidential Primary Election is to ensure poll workers understand and know how to issue the correct ballot to the voter," she said, as well as returning the ballots received and casted at the polls securely back to Martinez.

County Clerk-Recorder-Registrar Kristen Connelly, appearing at the Feb. 12 Lafayette City Council meeting, further affirmed the significance of the upcoming election.

"In my first year in office, there was one message that I got over and over again from my counterparts around the state: that the March 2024 presidential Primary in California is going to be the most complex in the history of the state because it is the first we are mailing a ballot to all registered voters in a partisan presidential primary," she said.

Connelly has undertaken a significant outreach effort to enlist council members in 18 cities and jurisdictions throughout the county, like the visit to Lafayette, to raise awareness about the upcoming election.

The youth voter, notably the 16- and 17-year-olds, is one category she hopes to make inroads. This includes an extensive effort to pre-register them, which is allowed under California law, which her staff undertakes when visiting schools during High School Voter Education Week each September.

"Research shows that if you can get a person to vote three elections in a row, they are more likely to become a lifetime voter," Connelly said.

Early voting and drop box info

Now that ballots have arrived in the post to registered voters, there are options to cast them before March 5.

There are 704,567 registered voters in the county, and 90-95% of ballots are cast as Vote-By-Mail (VBM) ballots. Return of these is split evenly between secure drop boxes and United States Postal Service.

Early voting options include putting them in 24/7 drop boxes located in Moraga (1500 Saint Mary's Rd.), Orinda (22 Orinda Way), and Lafayette (3477 School St.), or sending ballots through traditional mail.

An early voting polling station will be open at Walnut Creek City Hall on March 1, 2 and 4.

On Election Day, all area polling places are open from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. Where your polling place is located can be found at www.contracostavote.gov and clicking on My Voter Information under the Services tab.

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[back](#)

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