

Director's Office
240 Main Street Suite 400
P.O. Box 110017
Juneau, Alaska 99811-0017
☎ 907-465-4611 📠 907-465-3203
elections@alaska.gov



Elections Offices ☎
Absentee-Petition 907-270-2700
Anchorage 907-522-8683
Fairbanks 907-451-2835
Juneau 907-465-3021
Nome 907-443-5285
Mat-Su 907-373-8952

STATE OF ALASKA
Division of Elections
Office of the Lieutenant Governor

October 12, 2020

The Honorable Donald C. Olson, Senator
Alaska State Legislature
Alaska State Capitol, Suite 514
Juneau, AK 99801-1182

Dear Senator Olson:

First, I want to be clear that the division takes the conduct of all elections very seriously. The division values the voice of all Alaskans. To suggest anything less is demeaning and demoralizing to the 28 full time employees of the division. In spite of the COVID pandemic, the division offices have remained staffed. In-person services continued to ensure that all voters could receive assistance. Division staff have taken their responsibility to serve the voters of the state seriously while trying to remain personally safe during this pandemic.

The division of elections has been recruiting election officials for the 2020 election cycle since mid-March. It is not a flawless process. The division receives commitments from officials and letters of agreement, but as the election nears, sometimes they decide not to work or do not respond to calls. The division works with local governments, tribes, native associations, legislative offices to help get the word out that workers are needed. For the primary election, social media was heavily utilized, state workers were encouraged to serve as election workers—sending boosts and targeting messaging in areas of the state where workers were needed.

Newtok-Mertarvik was not the only community where the division struggled to find election officials. Between the dates of July 24 and August 7, the division sent letters to all registered voters in 20 communities, including Newtok-Mertarvik, informing them no workers had been secured for the primary election, asking them for assistance in finding workers and advising them of what their voting options were for the primary. All voters in these communities were also either sent an absentee by-mail ballot application and/or provided with information about utilizing the division's online system and voting by electronic transmission. They had information about the upcoming election and what the status of voting was in their community at that time. Despite these efforts, no one in Newtok-Mertarvik contacted the division stating they would assist the division and the voters in their community by working at the polling places.

Voting did take place in all 441 precincts across the state for the 2020 primary election. Although some locations did not have in-person voting on election day, they were provided the opportunity to vote through the absentee in-person voting process (in addition to the communities mentioned above that received absentee by-mail ballot applications). These precincts were: (1) Cold Bay because the

voting official had to leave town due to medical and no one else would work. She offered absentee voting to all voters in the community prior to her departure and in the end 37 people voted in the primary versus just 8 voters in 2018. Her efforts are to be commended. (2) Kake because this community locked down due to COVID. The precinct chair who was also the absentee voting official continued to provide voting through election day absentee in-person. This resulted in 81 people voting in the 2020 primary versus 68 in 2018. (3) Takotna because no one in the community would agree to work at the precinct. The absentee voting official offered voting through election day, resulting in 25 people voting in the primary in 2020 versus 7 in 2018. (4) Nunam Iqua because of a COVID lockdown. An absentee voting official provided voting for 4 days, resulting in 18 people voting in the 2020 primary versus 11 in 2018. (5) Arctic Village because the division was notified the day before the election that community was in lock down. The second chief and another person were patrolling the community to ensure people were staying at home, so they conducted the election via absentee voting. This resulted in 18 people voting in the 2020 primary versus 26 in 2018. (6) Grayling because of a failure by USPS to get the red bag containing the election supplies to the location. USPS tracking indicated the red bag was in Grayling but then August 25 tracking showed the red bag in Seattle. All the equipment except the red bag was picked up by the chairperson, but without the bag, voting could not take place. In the end, 19 people voted absentee-in-person, 1 voted by mail and 1 voted by online delivery for a total of 21 versus 41 in 2018.

The situation in Newtok-Mertarvik evolved as outlined below:

- The division had no previous knowledge about the transition of Newtok to Mertarvik. Even during multiple calls with various individuals during the recruitment process, this was not mentioned by anyone in Newtok.
- The division struggled to find election workers in Newtok. Recruitment efforts began in mid-March. In early April, the co-chair agreed to work. In late May, the previous chair decided she might work and called the Region IV office in mid-June stating she would chair. The Region IV office made numerous attempts to reach her without success and finally with the assistance of the tribal clerk calling her on the VHF, she called the Region IV office on August 5 stating she wouldn't work. The tribal clerk assisted the division by hanging recruitment posters and spreading the word. The division did not feel it was secure to send voting equipment and ballots to a community without confirmed election officials.
- On August 4, 2020, the division emailed and faxed a letter to the village council advising them there were no workers to provide in person voting on election day; requesting assistance in helping find workers; explaining the pay and providing contact information for the Region IV elections supervisor; informing voters the only available option for voting as of that time was to vote online delivery ; information was provided about the online absentee ballot application system; information about applying for a ballot by electronic transmission and enclosed a paper application. On August 7, 2020 a letter was mailed to all registered voters in Newtok.
- It wasn't until August 11 that the division became aware of the transition of Newtok to Mertarvik.
- On August 11, two voters verbally agreed to work. Later, one returned from travel and wasn't sure if she would be able to work now because she didn't know if she had to quarantine. The co-chair agreed to find help and take care of the election. At that point,

voting materials and equipment were shipped via air cargo. The materials were to be transported from Anchorage to Nome to Bethel to Newtok. The materials were shipped via priority shipping. There were delays in shipping that were not brought to the division's attention until the day before election day, requiring the division to scramble to locate where the materials were and make arrangements to get them flown into Newtok.

- On election day, workers were finally secured. Sample ballots and a precinct register were faxed to Newtok. A Newtok resident told the Lt. Governor he was willing to assist voters in getting from Mertarvik to Newtok for voting but it appears that did not happen.
- 17 people ultimately voted in the 2020 primary versus 36 in 2018.
- For the general election, the division is planning to have in-person voting in Newtok on election day and absentee in-person voting in Mertarvik. We currently have 2 verbal commitments for workers in Newtok and an absentee voting official in Mertarvik. We are working with the school principal to secure space. Absentee voting materials have been sent to the official in Mertarvik. As soon as space is secured, the information will be added to the division's web site.

Every election year, recruiting and retaining workers is the most difficult task for the division. With 441 precincts, the division has to recruit over 2,000 workers to assist in running the election. Confirmation of workers for a precinct can change multiple times in a day, and the regional election supervisors spend the majority of their time from March through November recruiting (and replacing), training, and communicating with workers. This is not meant to be a complaint--we know how important it is that every voter have an opportunity to vote, and the division puts many, many long hours into trying to locate individuals in the communities that are willing to do the job. This is a crucial part of our duties, but also the hardest because we are dealing with people (who can change their minds) and hundreds of different communities. This is not just an issue this year but a perennial issue with elections. For example, in the 2018 primary election, the division was not able to find workers for Stevens Village and there was going to be no voting on election day. In spite of multiple attempts to find workers, none were secured. It wasn't until a voter contacted the division to inquire about voting, resulting in that voter stepping up to be the election official to open polls. Supplies were flown out to him from Fairbanks on the day of the election.

This is one of the reasons the division strives to have multiple available methods for voting available. The division has over 140 absentee voting locations across the state. For the November general election, this information can be found at <https://www.elections.alaska.gov/Core/avolocationsg.php>. As of today, the division has not secured workers in the following precincts: Cold Bay, Takotna, Elim, Point Lay and Nunam Iqua. Recruitment efforts continue daily. The division would appreciate any assistance the legislators from these areas can provide in helping to secure an election board for election day.

To give you a snapshot of what we expect in the general election and how it will be conducted, as of today's date there have been over 113,476 absentee applications processed for absentee voting for the general election and 111,049 absentee ballots sent. The division has worked hard to get the ballots out

to voters as soon as possible to ensure sufficient time to vote and return ballots. We began mailing ballots two days earlier in the primary election and four days earlier in the general than normal. For the primary election, every voter that applied timely for a ballot was sent a ballot. All ballots received were reviewed and counted within the statutory allowed timeframes. The division conducted one senate district and one house district recount and the results matched vote for vote to the results certified by the state review board. A hand count was conducted for absentee ballots in one house district and it also matched vote for vote to the results certified by the state review board.

Also for the primary, the division did not count absentee ballots until after voter history was completed for those voters who voted at the polling place on election day. This prevented 84 duplicate votes from being cast. This was a process that was implemented with the 2008 general election through the 2014 general election and started again with the 2020 primary election. We will use the same process for the 2020 general election. I think everyone would agree that ensuring the sanctity of one person one vote takes precedent over trying to rush the process.

I know this may be more information than you had originally asked about in your letter. I think it is important to see the entire picture and understand how all the pieces fit together. I am hopeful that every precinct will have a fully-staffed polling place available on election day—we will do everything we can to try and make that happen. But I am also realistic, especially in light of the pandemic, that we will encounter difficulties up to and including election day. As we did in the primary, we will work to remedy issues as quickly as possible and continue our efforts to locate workers. Any assistance you can provide would be much appreciated, or if you have other contacts that we should speak with that may be able to get the word out, that would be great.

Sincerely,



Gail Fenumiai
Director