

FAIRFAX COUNTY, VA. ELECTION PAGE PROGRAM WINS ELECTION CENTER BEST PRACTICES AWARD

The Fairfax County, Va. High School Page Program won the Best Practices Award at the Annual Election Center Conference last month in San Antonio, Texas. The Election Page Program, initiated in 2002, enables high school students to provide assistance in the polling places, and stimulates their interest in voting.

The Virginia General Assembly passed legislation enabling local election boards, with the cooperation of school authorities, to recruit high school students under 18 years of age to assist at the precincts on election day. Schools are closed on election day so there is no conflict with classes.

Fairfax County initiated the page program as an experiment in 2002. Precinct officer liked it so well it expanded to include 157 students for the 2001 gubernatorial election. Of these 14 were 18 years old and qualified to serve as paid poll workers. Each participating high school selects one teacher to serve as program coordinator. Half days are from 5:00 am to 1:00 pm or from 1:00 pm to 9:00 pm. Many that volunteered for the morning half of the day actually remained for the entire day. Pages work under the direction of the chief election officer assigned to the polling place.

Fairfax County has 594,000 registered voters assigned to 218 precincts, some combined in a polling place. The county recruits approximately 2,500 poll workers. Pages assist election officers with various tasks during the day beginning with setting up the polls, directing voters to the proper voting locations, assisting the elderly and disabled, closing down the polls, and providing support as required. Pages are not permitted to check names, operating voting machines, or tally votes. *Nevertheless, where pages are at the polls, fewer paid poll workers are required.*

The Election Board requires all election pages to complete a three-hour training class. Half of the class is devoted to election procedures; the other half is a workshop teaching them how to provide sensitive assistance to elderly and disabled voters. Pages are expected to dress properly (no jeans, sweats, shorts, t-shirts) and behave appropriately at the polls.

Pages are not paid, and must provide their own transportation and meals. Every effort is made to assign pages to precincts close to their home. Following the election, all student election pages receive a "Certificate of Appreciation" at a County Board of Supervisors meeting. The Board provides teachers with a list of participants and the number of hours worked so that they may receive whatever credit is offered by the high school.

Judy Flaig, Election Manager, and Sonia Skipper, Election Officer Coordinator, for the Fairfax County Electoral Board, presented the winning Best Practices Paper August 16 at the Election Center Conference. Twelve other "Best Practice" ideas were offered and included in a handout given to all conference attendees.