

Brendan Flanagan: Poll worker shortages risk repeating primary challenges in Wisconsin

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The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to closely examine the steps we are taking to keep people safe, especially ahead of the upcoming November presidential election. Naturally, much of the conversation has centered on ensuring the availability of absentee and mail-in voting options. In order for the 2020 election to truly be carried out in the safest way possible, though, we also need to give thorough consideration to how we can keep in-person polling places safe for those who want or need to use them.

Ensuring that in-person polling places allow for social distancing and all other necessary precautionary measures will be paramount not just for keeping voters safe, but for protecting poll workers, as well. However, this is only possible if a sufficient number of people volunteer to be poll workers, which currently presents a broad set of challenges.

The outbreak of COVID-19 has a very real and significant impact on who can safely serve as a poll worker. Data continues to indicate that older Americans have a higher risk of suffering severe health problems if they contract the virus. Older Americans, however, traditionally make up a significant portion of poll workers. According to the [Election Administration and Voting Survey](#), more than half of poll workers across the country were 61 or older, while slightly more than a quarter were over 70.

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While this of course presents its own risks, these are only compounded by the fact that it is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit people to be poll workers, even in a normal election year. The U.S. Election Assistance Commission found that [two-thirds](#) of jurisdictions in the U.S. had a difficult time finding enough poll workers in 2016, which was an increase from the prior two presidential election years. Unfortunately, this was [reflected](#) in the 2018 midterm elections as well.

These two problems could combine to cause serious issues on Election Day. After all, [as we saw](#) in the April statewide primary election, a lack of available poll workers only makes it more difficult to follow all the proper precautionary procedures at the polls and creates longer lines to vote. Because of a lack of available poll workers, Milwaukee only had [five](#) voting stations, while [dozens](#) of new COVID-19 cases were connected to in-person voting statewide.

That's why, to ensure that in-person voting is as safe as possible for this year's election, Wisconsin will need a more intergenerational makeup of poll workers. By engaging younger Wisconsinites to get involved on Election Day, as well as people 50 and older, we can help to keep everyone who works the polls safer by permitting for greater social distancing. This will in turn limit lines and minimize risk for those who elect to vote in-person, or those who may simply have no other choice.

Efforts are already underway to educate people of all ages of the importance of getting involved as poll workers, with organizations like AARP working alongside the Association of Younger Americans and Power the Polls to recruit as many poll workers as necessary. Even high-profile celebrities and athletes like [LeBron James](#) are leading initiatives to encourage more people to step in as poll workers. These strategic partnerships will surely mobilize voters to help out, allowing us to keep Wisconsinites safe and healthy on November 3.

Here in Wisconsin, we're no strangers to lending a hand to those in need. From the [Packers](#) up in Green Bay, to the Brewers and Bucks down in [Milwaukee](#), organizations across the state are helping to identify polling places that can guarantee a socially distanced and sanitary environment for in-person voting, both on Election Day and for early voting. However, these efforts will only be truly successful if enough people can help as poll workers. Otherwise, we risk facing similar challenges to what we faced in the spring, and the risks will be greater for everyone as a result.

-Brendan Flanagan is a Democratic consultant and a veteran of Obama for America