

Testimony of Mr. Isaac Cramer
Executive Director, Charleston County Board of Voter Registration and Elections
U.S. Senate Committee on Rules and Administration
March 12, 2024

Chairwoman Klobuchar, Ranking Member Fischer, and members of the committee,

Thank you for affording me the opportunity to address you today.

My name is Isaac Cramer, and I serve as the Executive Director of the Charleston County Board of Voter Registration and Elections. Additionally, I have the privilege of serving as vice chair of the election subcommittee for the National Association of Counties, and as a member of the United States Election Assistance Commission Board of Advisors.

I cannot overstate the significance of the county perspective in any topic involving election administration. We are the frontline workers responsible for ensuring the smooth conduct of elections nationwide. I can confidently say that my colleagues and I speak with a unified voice in support of adequate and predictable federal funding for elections and for robust protections for those entrusted with safeguarding our nation's voting processes. Administering elections in Charleston County is a responsibility I hold with the utmost seriousness. My journey to this role is deeply personal, rooted in my mother's dream of becoming a United States citizen when I was child. Witnessing her exercise her newly minted right to vote left an indelible mark on my life, igniting in me a passion for politics and then election administration. I am here testifying before you today because of her hard work and determination.

My goal is to provide for secure, free, and fair elections. We must follow federal and state laws while ensuring that all Americans have the ability to make their voices heard at the ballot box.

As we stand on the threshold of yet another crucial election cycle, it is incumbent upon election administrators to draw from the lessons of the past to strengthen the foundations of our democracy for the future.

Reflecting on our preparations for the 2024 elections in Charleston County, our main concerns revolve around three pivotal needs: the protection of election officials, the security of our polling places, and the assurance of adequate and reliable federal funding.

The safety and well-being of our election personnel, including staff and poll managers, lie at the heart of our operational concerns. During the June 2022 Primaries, our polling places became battlegrounds for disruptive elements seeking to undermine the electoral process. A local group traveled around to our polling places on Election Day. They harassed our lead poll managers, claimed we were breaking the law, and at several locations called law enforcement to come to polling places and demanded they arrest our poll managers. Just to be clear, under South Carolina law, only the poll managers may call law enforcement to come to a polling place. One of the leaders of this group posted on social media to his followers, "For all of you on the team tomorrow observing the polls, Good Hunting. You know where you are looking for. We have the enemy on their back foot, press the attack. Forward." The "enemies" that they were referring to were their own neighbors. Good people who were simply carrying out their civic duty to help our democracy function. As our lead poll managers returned from their locations on election night, many expressed that they felt unsafe. Such incidents not only jeopardize the safety of our personnel but also erode public trust in the integrity of our elections.

The recent spotlight on South Carolina during the presidential preference primaries serves as a stark reminder of the vigilance required to uphold the democratic process. While major incidents were averted, instances of voter issues underscored the importance of bolstering security measures at polling locations. The growing reluctance among poll workers to endure harassment and disinformation further worsens the challenges faced by election administrators. Without the dedication of these essential volunteers, our elections would not be able to happen.

I believe the Charleston County model can serve as a resource to other election officials wondering how they can ensure the security of each polling location and the safety of every voter and poll manager. Preparing for the administration of the upcoming elections, our office meets monthly with our Counter Threat Manager, local law enforcement, emergency management, and public safety. Collaborating with county officials, we have embarked on initiatives to assess and enhance the security apparatus of our facilities. In July 2023, we hosted our first-ever Election Security Workshop at the Charleston County Emergency Operations Center (EOC). Attendees included election leaders and law enforcement officials from across the state, as well as members from national organizations. We have used this a model for all our pre-election meetings to take place at the EOC. We meet with mayors, incident command, and our partners at the municipal and county level. We collaborate to ensure that all our polling locations will be protected in any disruptive event. We use these meetings for resource sharing and decision making and to gather and discuss intelligence on threats from national and local sources that can inform our

decision-making and planning. We created a Law Enforcement Guide, shared with all our local law enforcement, to better prepare them for any incidents during the election cycle. We learned in 2022 that we wanted to empower law enforcement to support not only the voters that cast their ballot, but election officials at the polling locations. We discovered that there was an information gap. It was also through these meetings that we gained the data and ideas necessary to make investments in upgraded surveillance systems and access control mechanisms. These upgrades are imperative to mitigate potential risks and ensure the integrity of our election operations.

However, not every county can make similar investments. Numerous counties in South Carolina are unable to upgrade election infrastructure, including the security of their elections buildings, provide 24/7 camera surveillance, or have adequate space to prepare and test election equipment. Whenever I travel and speak with my colleagues in South Carolina, whether it is a rural county like Laurens or an urban and populous county like Greenville, the lack of access to federal funds to enhance their elections operations is the same. South Carolina is one of several states that does not distribute HAVA funds to the local county level. This needs to change. Congress must appropriate more election grant funding, but those funds also must get down to the people who run the elections day to day. All federal funding should be administered in coordination with or made available directly to counties.

The demand for increased funding is reinforced by the expanding role of Artificial Intelligence (AI). While AI brings efficiency gains, it also presents challenges for election officials. In Charleston County, we employ various methods to monitor social media, phone calls, and other communication channels to ensure voters receive reliable election information and safeguard our teams. The potential for malicious actors to exploit AI underscores the need to equip election officials with the essential resources and tools for effective preparation.

Also in preparation of 2024, we have a huge need to recruit the next generation of poll workers as many workers have left due to threats and harassment. Charleston County relies on poll managers who serve their local communities. Without them, elections are impossible to administer. To demonstrate that it is possible for counties to apply for direct funding, the EAC awarded \$1 million dollars in discretionary grant funding, enacted in the 2023 Consolidated Appropriations Act, to support the Help America Vote College Program (HAVCP) authorized in the Help America Vote Act of 2002. Charleston County applied for and received about \$76,000 from the EAC for our innovative program aimed at recruiting college students to serve as poll workers. The poll manager workforce continues to age, and it is necessary to instill civic engagement in the next generation. We have two components of this program: the first is an

annual course in which students learn about elections and serve as poll managers for Charleston County on Election Day. The second is to build a recruitment program alongside students, who can provide guidance on the best way to engage their peers. We want to ensure that we have poll workers for years to come by bringing in a contingent of college-age workers through the course and then through the sustainable recruitment strategy. We also want to instill a sense of civic pride that will hopefully be something students carry with them as they grow.

To help with the growing shortage of poll workers, we have created the Day for Democracy program, which allows county employees to serve on Election Day. County employees who participate receive poll worker pay on top of an administrative leave with pay from the County. This innovative approach led to over 15% of our poll workers being county employees in 2023. Not only were we successful in gaining highly qualified workers who believe in service to their community, we also gave them the opportunity to see how elections are conducted and the meticulously planning that is required. Our Day for Democracy participants then became ardent defenders of the integrity our elections in the local community. Having trusted public officials serving as poll workers greatly boosts public trust in elections.

As we recruit the next generation of poll workers, I am also concentrated on training and giving resources to our poll workers so they can be resilient in the face of any threat. We are enhancing our training on what to do in active shooter situations, how to mitigate threats and disturbances, and how to communicate in highly stressful situations. Many of our poll workers remember the days where elections were simple. They have now become more complex, and the stakes have never been higher. In an imperfect world, election administrators are expected to execute everything perfectly.

Counties support a consistent, predictable and dedicated federal funding stream to assist us with meeting the significant federal requirements already imposed on local governments administering elections. A consistent federal funding stream would allow counties to:

- Prepare for future technology and security updates
- Recruit, train and retain high-quality individuals that administer elections
- Conduct voter outreach

- Provide continued access to voters that have challenges as required by existing federal laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Voting Rights Act and Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA)¹

Counties cover the costs of administering federal elections even though federal races and candidates take up a significant portion of the ballots counties are required to design, print, mail, and process each election cycle. The federal government should pay its fair share of election administration costs.

I also come before you to ask that Congress pass Senator Klobuchar's bill that would protect election officials—Senate Bill 1318, the Election Worker Protection Act—and/or other proposals to strengthen election worker safety. Our democracy is being attacked, and the people safeguarding it are feeling the pressure more than ever. Congress must enact legislation that imposes appropriate penalties for offenses including but not limited to the following:

- Harassing or intimidating election officials in the performance of their duty
- Threatening or causing harm to election officials or their families
- Attempting to pressure election officials or their family members to violate state and federal election law or the U.S. Constitution
- Doxing, or disseminating by any means the personal information of election officials or their family members²

Without increased efforts to protect election workers, counties will continue to see increased resignations of career election officials and struggle to recruit and retain seasonal poll workers. In South Carolina over 70% of election directors have left their post since 2020. I often am asked why I am still in this profession. It really is a simple answer for me. I believe in the United States of America and the freedoms we enjoy. I am able to serve this great country by providing the mechanism by which our country was founded: the ability to give everyone a voice in shaping the future and direction of our country through voting. Election administrators need the support of Congress now more than ever to protect and fund our elections.

¹ National Association of Counties. (2024). *County Election Administration*.

² National Association of Counties. (2024). *County Election Administration*.