

**Washington County
Localized Emergency Action
Plan “LEAP”**

CEATS Capstone Project

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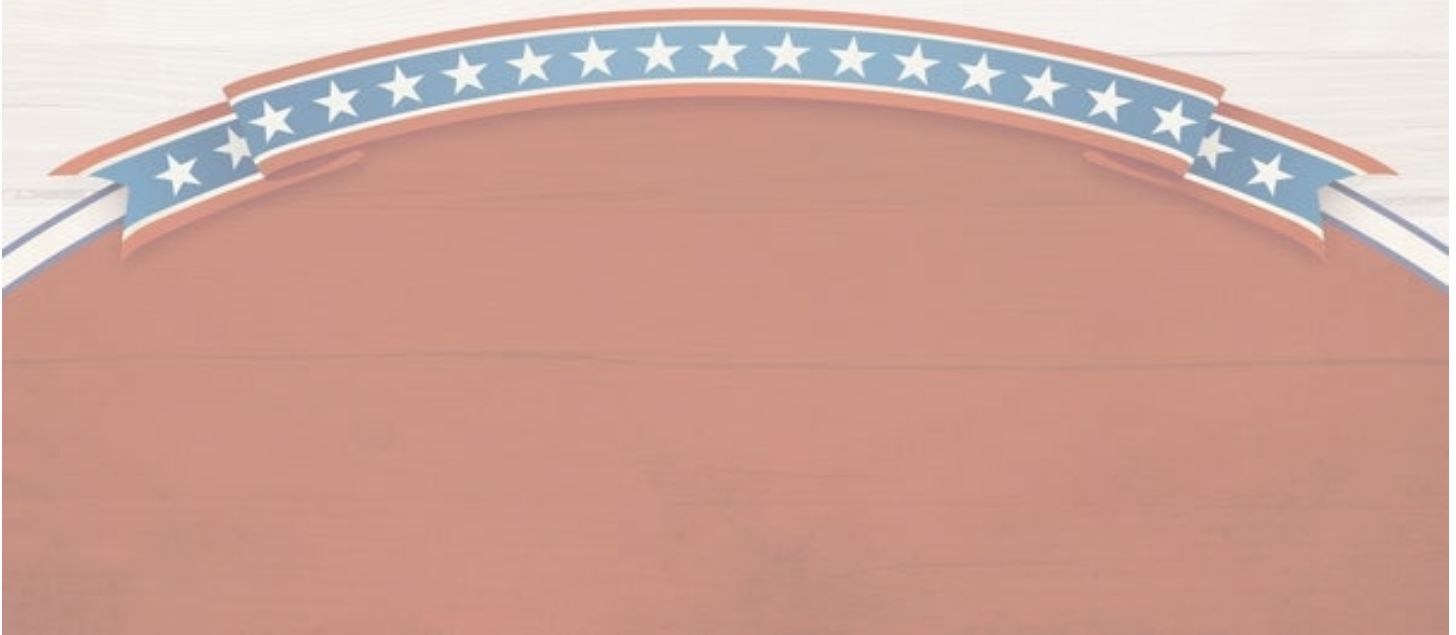
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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Project Goals.....	3
Methods.....	4
CEATS Principles & Tools.....	6
Conclusion.....	7
References.....	8
Expression of Gratitude.....	9



Introduction

In deciding on a subject for this project, an inventory of the Washington County election process was needed, to determine what was lacking. After considering the current climate of elections and discussions with the current clerk, the decision of needing an emergency action plan was made. This capstone project is to provide poll workers with a plan of action for an emergency, such as a weather disaster, fire or active shooter.

In 2024 Washington County EMD Deni Stempowski created a general, county wide plan for election day addressing a variety of threats and emergencies with suggested actions. Prior to that there wasn't a set plan or procedure for emergencies or disasters during elections. Due to the lack of a plan, responsibility fell on the poll workers to make decisions on how to keep themselves and the county voters safe and to figure out what to do with ballots and equipment in the event of an emergency. The majority of people feel unprepared to take action in an emergency. While our poll worker training does inform workers of what to do in these situations, many times people feel that a disaster is unlikely to affect them and have a wait and see approach to these situations. Having an emergency plan in place will reduce panic and fear as well as being crucial in saving lives and minimizing personal injury and property damage during an unforeseen crisis.

The LEAP (Localized Emergency Action Plan) project builds off the county wide emergency plan and creates a specific plan for each location. Washington County currently has 11 polling sites to service approximately 19,250 registered voters. Washington County spans more than 500 square miles. To give perspective, Gibson Township's polling location is in the northeast corner of Washington County while Posey Township's location is in the southwest corner. The shortest travel distance between the two locations is 34 miles with a driving time of approximately 45 minutes. Each polling location is different, and the available resources vary from site to site.

In addition, some of our sites are over 20 miles from our county sheriff's department. This creates a minimum response time of 20-25 minutes to our farthest location by our sheriff's and ambulance departments. This response time is only if all conditions were to be perfect, which we all know isn't always the case, especially during a weather event or widespread disaster. Also, the majority of our county's first responders are volunteers, which creates a slower response by fire departments since the response time would include the time needed for them to respond to their station and then respond to the scene.

Introduction

This project is beneficial to the clerk's office and myself. First, each employee is a registered voter of Washington County, meaning that any of us and/or our family members could likely be at a polling location during an emergency in the future. Also on Election Day, the clerk's office shifts to being the election office only. Routine clerk's office responsibilities are placed on hold allowing our focus to be on the election only to ensure polling locations, workers, voters and the community have our full attention and are available for any questions they may have. On a personal level, the success of this project is very important to me as my husband and father along with many friends are volunteer first responders. Because of that, I have spent my life surrounded by fire fighters, first responders, police and EMS. I understand their responsibilities and importance of emergency planning. I hope this project not only helps the poll workers, but the first responders as well. LEAP will be beneficial by establishing a well-organized plan that will make their arrival on scene less chaotic, allowing first responders to focus on other tasks.

While the risk of an emergency or natural disaster on a specific day at a specific location may seem low but the possibility is very real. According to the National Weather Service, a portion of Tennessee has been impacted by tornados three separate times on Election Day. In 2019, Clark County experienced an electrical fire at a polling location, forcing voting to move to an outdoor shelter. Then in 2020, a man was arrested after assaulting two poll workers because he was turned away for not having the required identification. Each of these events could have been far worse without having a plan in place by creating a ripple effect on the election process. For example, an emergency would affect the closing of polls due to needing to extend voting leading to unofficial results being delayed. When a crisis hits, adrenaline spikes and logic usually take a backseat. In the first few minutes of a fire, medical emergency or natural disaster, people often freeze and make irrational choices.

Each location's LEAP binder provides a layout of the specific building, the building address, important phone numbers as well as plans for fire, severe weather, active shooter and medical emergencies. Having a clear plan in place ensures a faster and more targeted intervention of first responders. Having a plan will also improve communication by poll workers being able to remain calm and provide first responders with the necessary information and understanding their specific roles will reduce confusion and chaos during high-stress situations.

Project Goals

The main goal of this project is to improve the safety of our poll workers and county voters by expanding and simplifying the current emergency plan. The second project goal is to establish and to create a Localized Emergency Action Plan (LEAP), a site-specific plan, based on the evaluation of each polling location in Washington County with the assistance of the current clerk, EMD, site contact person as well as local first responders and law enforcement.

Based on those evaluations, create an easy-to-follow instructional binder for poll workers to use in the event of possible threats and natural hazards on Election Day. Training and review of the binders will be provided to workers during our poll worker training. We will discuss the potential threats, and they will have an opportunity to ask any questions.

Too many times, we take our safety and security for granted until something happens. While we cannot prevent bad things from happening, we do have the obligation and responsibility to be prepared for the what ifs. My hope is for poll workers to feel more at ease in the event of an incident on Election Day and to be able to assist the first responders in completing their responsibilities.

Methods

The first step was reviewing Washington County's current emergency plan and determining what areas were lacking in detail and what areas needed attention, when it came to our current polling locations. The deadline for project completion was set in time for the spring poll worker training. The first few weeks were designated for researching and reviewing the current plan.

It was anticipated to have all location evaluations completed before the beginning of 2026, however between weather issues, personal schedules, illness and other medical issues that deadline was not met. Prior to location evaluations, a list of each polling place, contact person, address and phone number was created. GIS mapping was utilized to print out a map of the precincts, building sketches and a map of the flood zones to identify the locations in need of a flood plan. A location evaluation form was prepared for each location. The form included the location name, address, contact person, as well as local fire personnel and law enforcement agencies and important phone numbers. Also included was the election office number, areas to address any current plans, available resources, a fire, tornado and active shooter plan.

Once the site evaluations were ready to begin, a texting group between myself, the clerk and the EMD was created. Due to varying schedules, picking a time to meet was difficult. Initially, I checked with the EMD's schedule followed by the location contact person. About halfway through the evaluations the EMD had surgery and was unable to meet us, but we were able to video chat with her while evaluating several locations. Once we had a date and time set, the local fire department and sheriff were contacted to invite them to the meeting. The meetings would last about an hour. In meetings at each location, the location of fire extinguishers, first aid kit, AED, best shelter in place locations and the safest evacuation route and meeting point were identified. During the evaluation the team also discussed the current plan and resource if available, the lay out of the structure, the number of workers and voters assigned to that polling place, the location and types of exit doors, and the location and size of a tornado shelter.

After each location evaluation was completed, a site-specific instruction for each emergency was compiled. The completed instructions were set to be clear and direct for poll workers to follow and to provide them with ideas of how and when to handle active threats. Additionally, the plans provide instructions on when to contact the election office for further instructions in the event of an emergency.

Methods

LEAP binders were created for each location. Each binder includes the address, important phone numbers, instructions for each emergency, a sketch of the building and other information. The binders will be added to their inspector bags that contain required forms, supplies and election information for the upcoming primary election on May 5th, 2026. The binders are small and convenient so that they are easy to grab during an emergency. The utilized 3x5 mini binders were found on Amazon. Each page in the binder was laminated for extra protection in the event of any kind of water damage. Additionally, the EMD donated an emergency weather radio for each location.

Poll workers will be introduced to this project and their LEAP binders during the Poll Worker Training April 25th, 2026. To measure the success of this project, a survey will be created for each poll worker to fill out, after the election is over and polls are closed. The survey will include questions of how straight forward and clear the instructions were, if it was beneficial, if it helped them to feel more prepared and will ask for suggestions on what could be improved.

CEATS Principles

& Tools

Prior to beginning the CEATS course, I believed I possessed a fair comprehension of the election process. Now after having participated in the program, I feel much more confident in my ability to be a part of the election process. From the first session, this course has instilled the value of teamwork and connections. Knowing that we aren't alone on this wild ride and seeing firsthand that there is a whole community of election workers and resources, reassured my fears and uncertainties of elections. The extensive tools that this program provided were utilized in the creation of this project.

In Phase 1, Session 3 “Information Technology and Elections”, addressing equipment security and the authentication process helped me to consider the ways equipment is safeguarded in the event of a threat. While my project is more focused on election day emergencies, I do hope that the project can continue to grow to include early voting and election preparations.

In Phase 1, Session 4 participants were split up into groups to discuss the best practices of different topics related to election. Fortunately, the group I was a part of had the topic “Emergency Management Guidelines”. As small as it seems, this was very beneficial to my project to hear all the different ways other counties do things. While we are all trying to complete the same task, the way we achieve that goal is different. One of the most important lessons was that there is never too much training. Creating a COOP (Continuity of Operation Plan) and making sure that staff understands the roles and responsibilities of their positions and the big impact it has on a successful election.

The EAC's Election Security Resources assisted in this project to identify potential threats and what to be aware of. The presentation by Committee for Safe and Secure Elections helped in understanding small ways to teach poll workers how to identify issues and handle stressful situations. Also, the Election Accessibility presentation by Indiana Disability Rights addressed protruding objects and accessibility played a role in better understanding needs of our counties current polling locations.

Conclusion

This project was created with the focus of voters' and poll workers' safety in mind and to provide each polling location with the needed resources, plans, and suggestions in the event of an emergency. With the assistance of the county clerk, the EMD, each location's contact individual and local fire/police, I feel that an effective Localized Emergency Action Plan (LEAP) has been successfully established for each location improving on the plan that was already in place for Washington County.

Each LEAP binder provides polling locations with a fire plan including the location of fire extinguishers and exits, an evacuation plan with outdoor meeting area, a tornado plan including shelter locations, an active shooter plan utilizing the Run, Hide, Fight protocol and basic instructions for medical issues. The LEAP binders eliminate the guesswork and allow poll workers to focus on safety rather than feeling overwhelmed by uncertainty. Also, by having this resource in place, it protects the integrity and public confidence of elections.

Ensuring that poll workers are provided with accurate instructions to secure voting equipment, ballots and obtaining the necessary information is vital to the outcome of the election. The importance of a LEAP may not be at the forefront of election preparedness however, the security of ballots, equipment, the public trust and the outcome and success of an election should always be the focal points of every election.

Implementing LEAP is helpful to our county's citizens by minimizing the risk of enhancing a potential emergency further. Emergencies are made worse by inadequate preparation or lack of planning, panicking, hesitating to call for help, confusion, and acting without proper knowledge. It is our responsibility, as election officials, to provide poll workers with training and tools to effectively react to an emergency.

Future plans for this project include adding instructions for the emergency shut down of equipment, securing ballots which are currently part of the Inspector Binders to the LEAP binders as well. Also working with each location to mark all designated shelter areas and create an evacuation map to serve as a visual aid. The size of the binders may need to be adjusted to add additional items. As well as discussing plans for future education and training.

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Expression of Gratitude

I want to first thank Stephanie Rockey, Clerk of Washington County, for her endless support, guidance, assistance with this project and her encouragement to participate in the CEATS program. Also, to my family and co-workers in the Clerk's Office for always being willing to step-up and fill in while I was away at class and visiting polling locations, your help is appreciated more than you know. A huge thank you to Deni Stempowski, Emergency Management Director, for her assistance in evaluating each location and her valuable knowledge of the county's current plan and safety procedures. I want to thank each first responder, law enforcement officer and location contact person who assisted in determining the best practices for the LEAP binders. To the voters and poll workers of Washington County, thank you for participating in the political process and for your input, which is essential to the progress and improvement of our county, state and country. Lastly, thank you to the CEATS instructors for their insight of the election process and passion to improve Indiana elections.