



## **Legislative Partnerships – Strengthening Elections**

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## Acknowledgements

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We would also like to thank the Association of Indiana Counties legislative staff for their insight and assistance in helping us better understand the legislative environment and the importance of effective advocacy. Their knowledge and willingness to share best practices were invaluable throughout the development of this project.

In addition, we appreciate the support and engagement of the CEATS program leadership and fellow participants who provided feedback, encouragement, and perspective during the capstone process. Finally, we extend our gratitude to the legislators and stakeholders who are willing to engage in meaningful dialogue and partnerships to support legislation that helps the clerks serve their communities and safeguards election security and integrity.

This collaboration and dedication helped shape this initiative and reinforce the importance of communication, advocacy, and professional development for clerks and election administrators across Indiana.

CEATS Team: Yvette Runkle, former two-term Clerk of Wells County; Shelley Septer, the current elected Huntington County Clerk of the Circuit Court 2019-2026; and Kris Bickel, candidate for Huntington County Clerk of the Circuit Court 2027. Together, we represent the passing of the torch, honoring the experience and dedication of the past, the leadership and service of the present, and the promise of the future. Our shared commitment to public service and to strengthening the role of clerks and election administrators in Indiana helped inspire this project and reinforce the importance of mentorship, collaboration, and continued advocacy within the clerk community, governmental partners and the important partnership with our legislators by sharing our frontline experiences and education. The example we strive to set reflects the enduring dedication required to serve the public and safeguard our elections with integrity and professionalism, and our collective experience has helped shape both the purpose and direction of this project.

## Legislative Partnerships – Strengthening Elections

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### Abstract

This capstone project focuses on strengthening partnerships between Indiana’s county clerks and state legislators in order to enhance election administration, ensure practical and implementable legislation, and build public trust in democratic processes. County clerks serve on the front lines of election administration and possess valuable operational knowledge that can inform effective public policy. However, gaps in communication between policymakers and local election officials can sometimes result in legislation that creates operational challenges or unintended consequences at the county level.

This project seeks to address these challenges by promoting meaningful collaboration between clerks, legislators, and key stakeholders involved in election policy and administration. By fostering open dialogue, encouraging relationship-building, and providing legislators with greater awareness of county-level election operations, the initiative works to bridge the gap between policy development and real-world implementation. In addition, the project emphasizes the importance of equipping clerks with advocacy and communication skills so they can effectively share their expertise and provide informed feedback during the legislative process.

Through structured engagement, stakeholder collaboration, and targeted advocacy efforts, this capstone project highlights practical strategies that can strengthen legislative partnerships and improve the development of election-related policies. The paper outlines the project’s goals, methodology, stakeholder involvement, progress updates, and outcomes, while also examining challenges encountered throughout the process. Lessons learned from these experiences provide insight into the value of proactive engagement, transparency, and unified communication among election officials and policymakers.

Ultimately, this project presents a framework for sustainable collaboration between county clerks and legislators, demonstrating how stronger partnerships can lead to more informed legislation, more efficient election administration, and increased public confidence in the integrity and transparency of Indiana’s electoral system.

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## Introduction

The integrity of elections is the cornerstone of democratic governance and a critical component of maintaining public confidence in government institutions. Free, fair, and transparent elections ensure that citizens have a voice in selecting their leaders and shaping public policy. At the state and local levels, election administration requires careful coordination, adherence to legal standards, and a commitment to protecting the rights of voters while maintaining the security and reliability of the electoral process. When election systems operate effectively, they reinforce the legitimacy of democratic institutions and strengthen public trust in government.

In the State of Indiana, county clerks play a central role in administering elections and implementing the laws that govern the electoral process. As locally elected officials and election administrators, clerks are responsible for overseeing numerous operational aspects of elections, including voter registration, ballot preparation, absentee voting, election day logistics, vote tabulation, and the certification of results. These responsibilities require strict compliance with state statutes, administrative rules, and federal election regulations. In carrying out these duties, clerks must ensure that elections remain accessible to eligible voters while maintaining the highest standards of security, accuracy, and transparency.

Because county clerks serve on the front lines of election administration, they possess firsthand knowledge of the practical realities and operational challenges involved in conducting elections. Their daily experiences provide valuable insight into how election laws function in practice, as well as how proposed legislative changes may affect the administration of elections at the county level. However, despite the importance of this perspective, communication and alignment between local election administrators and state lawmakers has not always been consistent. At times, gaps in understanding between those who create election laws and those responsible for implementing them have led to operational inefficiencies, administrative burdens, or confusion among voters and election officials alike.

These challenges highlight the importance of building stronger partnerships between legislators and the local officials responsible for administering elections. Effective governance depends not only on well-written legislation but also on the ability of public officials to collaborate, share expertise, and work toward common goals. When legislators and election administrators maintain open lines of communication, policies can be crafted with a clearer understanding of operational realities, resource limitations, and the needs of voters across diverse communities.

Recognizing this need, the Indiana Clerks Association has emphasized the value of proactive engagement with lawmakers and other key stakeholders involved in election policy. By establishing stronger relationships with legislators, clerks can provide meaningful feedback on proposed legislation, identify potential implementation challenges, and offer practical solutions based on their professional experience. These collaborative efforts can help ensure that election laws are not only well-intended but also feasible, effective, and aligned with the realities of county-level administration.

This capstone project was developed to support and formalize these collaborative efforts by strengthening partnerships between Indiana's county clerks and state legislators. Through

structured engagement, advocacy training, and strategic communication, the project seeks to bridge the gap between policy development and election administration. The initiative encourages constructive dialogue, promotes mutual understanding, and equips clerks with the tools needed to effectively share their expertise during the legislative process.

By creating opportunities for consistent communication and professional collaboration, this project aims to establish a sustainable framework for legislative partnership. Strengthening these relationships not only improves the legislative process but also supports more efficient election administration, promotes transparency, and reinforces public confidence in the integrity of Indiana's electoral system. Ultimately, the success of democratic governance depends on the willingness of public servants to work together in the best interest of the communities they serve.

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## **Problem Statement**

County clerks play a critical role in the administration of elections, serving as the local officials responsible for implementing state and federal election laws and ensuring that elections are conducted in a secure, accurate, and transparent manner. As the administrators who oversee voter registration, ballot preparation, polling locations, absentee voting, vote tabulation, and certification of election results, clerks possess extensive operational knowledge about how election policies function in real-world settings. Despite this vital role, county clerks sometimes face challenges in effectively communicating the practical implications of election laws and proposed legislative changes to policymakers.

While many legislators actively seek input from election administrators, there are instances where proposed legislation is developed without sufficient consultation with those responsible for implementing it at the county level. When this occurs, legislative proposals may unintentionally create operational challenges, administrative burdens, or unfunded mandates that local election offices must address with limited resources. New procedural requirements, technology mandates, or policy changes may be introduced with the goal of improving election processes, yet without collaboration and input from local administrators, these changes can be difficult to implement effectively within existing county infrastructures.

In addition to operational challenges, frequent changes to election laws without clear communication or adequate explanation can contribute to confusion among election officials, poll workers, and voters. Election procedures often require detailed planning, training, and coordination well in advance of an election cycle. When policies shift rapidly or lack clarity, it can create uncertainty for the individuals responsible for administering elections and may also affect public understanding of voting procedures. Over time, these circumstances can weaken public confidence in election systems and increase the risk of misinformation or misunderstanding about how elections are conducted.

These challenges highlight the need for stronger, more consistent collaboration between lawmakers and county clerks. Effective election policy requires both legislative leadership and practical insight from those responsible for implementing the law. When legislators and election

administrators work together, policies are more likely to be informed by real-world experience, resource considerations, and operational feasibility. Such collaboration helps ensure that election laws are not only well-intentioned but also practical, sustainable, and capable of supporting efficient election administration.

This capstone project addresses these challenges by focusing on strategies that strengthen relationships between county clerks and state legislators. By promoting proactive engagement, increasing legislative awareness of county-level election operations, and establishing structured channels for communication and feedback, the project seeks to bridge the gap between policy development and implementation. Strengthening these partnerships can help align legislative priorities with the operational needs of local election offices, ultimately ensuring that election laws are effective, implementable, and supportive of public trust in the democratic process.

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## **Vision Statement**

To establish a collaborative, transparent, and informed relationship between county clerks and state legislators that enhances election administration, supports practical legislation, and builds trust in Indiana's democratic processes.

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## **Goals and Objectives**

### **1. Strengthening Collaboration**

The proposed initiative is designed to bridge the gap between administrative reality and legislative policy by fostering a culture of strengthening collaboration through structured communication and unified goals. By cultivating professional relationships between clerks and legislators, the project aims to transition the current framework from one of reactive compliance to proactive partnership, resulting in more cohesive governance.

### **2. Enhance Legislative Awareness**

This connection is further solidified by enhancing legislative awareness, providing lawmakers with direct insights into county-level operations to facilitate evidence-based policymaking. The intended outcome is a legislative body equipped with a nuanced understanding of election challenges, ensuring that new laws are grounded in operational feasibility and practical necessity.

### **3. Promote Policy Alignment**

To ensure the long-term sustainability of the election system, the initiative prioritizes promoting policy alignment to specifically minimize unfunded mandates and administrative inefficiencies. By synchronizing legislative intent with local capacity, the

expected result is a streamlined electoral process that optimizes resource allocation and reduces systemic friction.

**4. Foster Advocacy Skills**

Simultaneously, the program will foster advocacy skills among clerks, equipping them with the professional training necessary to provide expert testimony and lead high-level policy discussions. This empowerment transforms clerks into essential technical advisors who can shape the future of their field.

**5. Increase Transparency and Trust**

Ultimately, these efforts converge to increase transparency and trust, establishing a consistent communication framework that reinforces public confidence. The final impact will be a resilient election infrastructure where stakeholders and citizens alike can rely on a process that is both expertly managed and legislatively sound.

**Methodology**

**Timeline and Action Steps**

Action Step	Stakeholders	Timeline	Resources
Stakeholders Strategy Meeting	CEATS Capstone team, Legislative Chairs, Clerks Association, AIC, SOS	Sep–Oct 2025	Internal coordination
Election Conference	Capstone CEATS Team and Stakeholders	Dec 2025	Met with Capstone Stakeholders to discuss positive progress.
Legislative Zoom calls, phone calls, in-person meetings instead of Legislative breakfast due to short session.	Clerks Legislative Committee, AIC Legislative Director, Legislators.	Nov–Jan 2025/2026	Stakeholders desire to build good relationships and be an advocate for Clerk focused legislation.
Legislative Zoom calls, phone calls, in-person meetings to discuss legislative drafts.	Clerks Legislative Committee, AIC Legislative Director,	Nov–Jan 2025/2026	Legislation and Bill drafts

Action Step	Stakeholders	Timeline	Resources
Advocacy Skills / Training Launch – Testifying on legislation and interacting with lawmakers.	CEATS team, President of the Clerks Association, Legislative Chairs, AIC Legislative Deputy Director, Clerks Association	Jan 2026 Legislative Conference Affiliate meeting-Future training for new clerks.	Facilitators, Speakers that instruct and inform on best practices for working with legislators and testifying on bills. In the future possibly work this into a best practice session at the annual conference.

**The project employs a multi-pronged approach to foster legislative partnerships and strengthens election administration:**

**1. Structured Legislative Engagement**

Legislative engagement was conducted through roundtables, Zoom meetings, in-person sessions, phone calls, and email correspondence with key stakeholders. Meetings were scheduled by the legislative chairs of the Clerk’s Association. Including in the meetings the Secretary of State’s Office, Association of Indiana Counties (AIC), Clerks Association Legislative Chairs, and state legislators. These tools ensured clerk’s perspectives were represented and enable timely feedback on legislative proposals.

**2. Legislative Awareness and Education**

This effort is designed for county election administrators and local government officials responsible for overseeing election operations. It aims to provide practical, county-level insights into how elections are administered, including the operational challenges, resource constraints, and day-to-day realities faced by local offices. By examining proposed election legislation through the lens of local implementation, the goal is to help county administrators better understand how policy changes could affect their procedures, staffing, technology, and compliance requirements. Ultimately, the intent is to support more informed decision-making by connecting statewide policy discussions with the real-world conditions and responsibilities of county election offices.

**3. Policy Alignment and Feedback**

To collect meaningful input from county clerks and election administrators, the process would involve several practical engagement methods designed to capture both broad feedback and detailed operational insight. This could include structured surveys sent to county election offices to gather consistent data on challenges, resource needs, and potential impacts of proposed legislation. In addition, small group roundtables or virtual listening sessions with clerks and election staff would allow for deeper discussion about day-to-day operations and implementation concerns. One-on-one interviews with a representative mix of counties—large, medium, and small—can help identify differences in capacity and operational realities. Finally, ongoing feedback channels, such as periodic check-ins or working groups with clerks, would ensure that

their perspectives continue to inform legislative drafting as proposals evolve. Together, these approaches help ensure that the input collected is practical, representative, and directly tied to the realities of administering elections at the county level. Collaborating with clerks, lawmakers and professional associations through committee meetings, training workshops, and legislative outreach to identify operational needs and support effective communication with policymakers. We have already accomplished meaningful collaboration and input from clerks and legislators during this legislative session. We plan to expand on these ideas to further strengthen our policy alignment and feedback.

This project will continue beyond our time in CEATS through the clerks who will remain in office and future clerks. We have thoughtfully considered our stakeholders to ensure this capstone ideology remains fluid and is carried forward over time and hopefully share with other states that struggle with building relationships with their legislators.

#### **4. Advocacy Skills Development**

In collaboration with the clerk association/legislative committee, we will develop training materials and conduct training sessions to empower clerks to provide testimony, advocate for operational needs, and communicate effectively with legislators. We accomplish this through legislative updates, conference training, and regular email communications with clerks to keep them informed on bill developments. Several of our stakeholders actively serve on key committees, including the Strategic Planning Subcommittee, ensuring their voices help shape our direction. Just today, one stakeholder provided valuable insight in preparation for the next legislative session. Chris Nancarrow exemplifies our commitment to empowering the next generation of Clerks by sharing knowledge and experience as we prepare to transition from office a true mark of public service. Association President Lisa Loftgreen also demonstrated strong leadership, maintaining a clear focus on the future of Clerks and emphasizing the importance of being well prepared, organized, and confident as we approach the 2027 legislative session and engage with legislators.

An example of this progress and growth can be seen in the following emails by Chris Nancarrow- Allen County Clerk and President of the Clerks Association and Hancock County Clerk Lisa Loftgreen's

Good morning, everyone!

The Strategic Planning Subcommittee held a zoom meeting yesterday and a suggestion was made for next legislative session. It concerns the collection of fees for mailings.

You'll see there are two versions of Ind. Code 33-32-2-10. This is causing confusion and the Office of Court Services is hoping some clarity can occur with a legislative clean-up. P.L. 41-2015 (SEA 2) and P.L. 191-2015 (HEA 1371) both amended the original statute in 2015, with P.L. 191 being the last one signed, per Michelle Goodman at the Office of Court Services. I've included the specific language below for your convenience.

It takes some time to decipher the two versions of the same statutory citation. Of course, it would be great to protect the ability of the Clerk to collect any such mailing fees, as much as possible, so that we're not incurring related costs from our General Fund. Also, it would be good to clarify recouping costs to either the Perpetuation Fund or General Fund.

Any thoughts on adding this to the Clerk's Legislative agenda for 2027 – even though many of us have 286 days (191 working days) left 😊

Chris Nancarrow, Esq.

*Clerk of the Courts*

Clerk of the Allen Circuit and Superior Courts

Thank you for providing this update pursuant to our By-Laws – much appreciated. That seems like a very reasonable request and one I believe all Clerks would support. We will be working on legislative asks and sharing thoughts and requesting feedback from Clerks over the next few months ahead of Summer Conference.

***Lisa M. Lofgreen***

*Hancock County Clerk*

## **5. Transparency and Trust-Building**

Our team will develop and conduct training sessions to empower clerks to provide testimony, advocate for operational needs, and communicate effectively with legislators. We will maintain consistent communication with legislators and key stakeholders to foster mutual respect, accountability, and public confidence in court operations. To ensure these relationships remain strong and effective, we will implement feedback loops—such as surveys, follow-up meetings, and stakeholder input—to monitor engagement and continuously improve our strategies. Through these collective efforts, our team will strengthen clerks' capacity to advocate for operations.

## **6. Legislation Conference and Legislation Session Success**

The CEATS team – Shelley Septer, Kris Bickel, and Yvette Runkle attended the 2026 Legislative Conference and participated in legislative hearings alongside our stakeholders. Several Clerk's bills are currently moving forward, and the team is actively working on amendments to legislation that will directly impact Clerks and Optical-Scan counties.

Our stakeholders provided knowledgeable and effective testimony, highlighted by Amy Rolfes’s impressive graphs and charts, which helped legislators clearly understand the need for the proposed legislation. These visuals played a critical role in demonstrating how the legislation would benefit Optical-Scan counties and improve election processes.

This experience highlighted the importance of working with legislators in a passionate yet respectful and professional manner to build strong, long-lasting relationships. Throughout the conference, stakeholders and Clerks met directly with lawmakers to share their perspectives and strengthen professional connections. Multiple legislators expressed appreciation for the Clerk’s expertise and demonstrated a willingness to collaborate by engaging in meaningful discussions and listening to their concerns.

Additionally, the CEATS team had the opportunity and privilege to meet with one of our CEATS team members (Yvette Runkle) Senator. During this meeting, we discussed our capstone project, and he thanked the team for our ambition, dedication, and commitment to work collaboratively with legislators

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## Updates and Progress

The team has established a series of action steps to engage stakeholders and strengthen legislative advocacy for clerks. The process began with a Stakeholders Strategy Meeting in September–October 2025, involving the CEATS Capstone team, Legislative Chairs, the Clerks Association, AIC, and the Secretary of State’s office, supported by internal coordination resources. Following this, the Election Conference in December 2025 brought together the Capstone CEATS team and stakeholders to review progress and discuss positive outcomes.

Due to the short legislative session, Legislative engagement occurred through Zoom calls, phone calls, and in-person meetings between November 2025 and January 2026, replacing the traditional legislative breakfast. Participants included the Clerks Legislative Committee, the AIC Legislative Director, and legislators, with the goal of fostering strong relationships and advocating for clerk-focused legislation. During the same timeframe, additional meetings focused specifically on reviewing legislative drafts and bills, involving the Clerks Legislative Committee and AIC Legislative Director, to ensure alignment and provide feedback on proposed legislation.

Finally, the team planned Advocacy Skills and Training program in January 2026 during the Legislative Conference Affiliate meeting, targeting current and future clerks. This training, facilitated by the CEATS team, the President of the Clerks Association, Legislative Chairs, and the AIC Legislative Deputy Director, provide instruction on best practices for testifying on bills and interacting with lawmakers, with the potential to integrate this content into the annual conference as a best-practice session.

Since initiating the Legislative Partnerships capstone project, the Clerks Association has achieved significant progress in strengthening relationships with legislators and advancing election policy priorities:

### **1. Legislative Engagement and Relationship Building**

- Shelley Septer participates in all Legislative Committee calls, providing real-time input and ensuring clerks' perspectives are consistently represented.
- Stakeholders engaged legislators via multiple channels, Zoom, phone, in-person meetings, and text messaging to focus on legislative drafts and operational concerns.
- The Zoom meeting with Representative Wesco was a key milestone, discussing legislative cleanup for optical scan counties and exploring earlier absentee ballot processing. This engagement reinforced the Clerks Association's credibility and influence in shaping election policy.
- The legislative chairs, legislative committee and AIC legislative deputy director meet weekly to talk about legislative bills, concerns, relationships with legislators

### **2. Strengthening Stakeholder Collaboration**

- A strong sense of unity among stakeholders has been maintained, including the Clerks Association board, legislative chairs, the Legislative Committee, and the AIC Legislative Director.
- Experienced leaders such as Kathy Williams and Kay Kilgore provided strategic guidance for approaching legislators and navigating the Statehouse, enhancing both efficiency and impact.
- The AIC Legislative Conference (Jan. 27-28) provided valuable opportunities that have since expanded outreach and engagement with more lawmakers.

### **3. Recognition and National Alignment**

- The project received national recognition via the EAC Idea Lab and Think Lab for innovative approaches to legislative collaboration.
- The NCSL highlighted past collaborations with the EAC as examples of effective partnerships, validating the Clerks Association's methodology and demonstrating alignment with national best practices.

### **4. Practical Legislative Progress**

- Legislative discussions influenced by the project include cleanup for optical scan counties and potential procedural changes for absentee ballot processing.
- Reciprocal engagement with legislators has been implemented to discuss both clerks' priorities and legislators' desired changes, creating a mutually beneficial dialogue.

### **5. Cohesion and Collective Effort**

- The CEATS team has distributed workload evenly, ensuring shared accountability.

- Continuous communication and collaboration have maintained momentum, even during early and condensed legislative sessions.
  - Positive reinforcement from legislators and internal stakeholders confirms the project is on track, strengthening both relationships and legislative impact.
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## CEATS Principles and Tools

The CEATS tools and principles played an important role in guiding the development of our capstone project. Throughout the course, we applied the strategies and frameworks learned in class to help organize our ideas, evaluate information, and improve the overall structure of our work. These tools helped us think more critically about our topic and encouraged us to approach the project in a more thoughtful and systematic way. By applying the principles taught in the CEATS program, we were able to strengthen our research, clarify our goals, and improve the flow and effectiveness of our final presentation. The guidance and feedback provided during the course also helped ensure that our ideas stayed focused and aligned with the objectives of the capstone project.

Example: U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) Commissioner Christy McCormick in Phase 1 Session 5, advocates for positioning local election officials as indispensable technical resources to strengthen collaborative governance with state legislators. By utilizing resources like the EAC guides, this framework emphasizes leveraging clerk expertise for evidence-based, operationally feasible, and funded policy.

## Summary

Progress demonstrates measurable achievements in relationship building, policy influence, and national recognition, providing a strong foundation for continued legislative collaboration and advocacy.

An example of this progress can be seen in the following excerpt from President Lisa Lofgreen's welcome email:

*"The Legislative Committee is generally the first to be filled since work begins toward the session during the last quarter of the previous year. Kathy Williams of Hamilton County and Nicole Browne of Monroe County will serve in the final year of their respective terms as Co-Chairs of the Legislative Committee this year. We are fortunate to have the knowledge and relationships built during their service in this capacity on behalf of our Association. We believed it was important to appoint a Clerk to shadow these two wonderful representatives over the course of the year. That Clerk is Michelle Shelton of Scott County. Michelle has been involved in the preparation for this session alongside Kathy and Nicole. We want to be sure to portray our Clerks Association as a united front to our legislators. Legislative Session moves very swiftly. We will provide updates routinely to keep everyone in the loop. If we reach out for feedback, please respond as quickly as you are able. In the event you plan to testify, please notify a member of the Legislative Committee. In the event testimony does not support the Association's stance on a bill,*

*the Clerk is requested to make it clear they are speaking on behalf of their own County and not on behalf of the Association. We don't want to risk misrepresenting the Clerks Association's collective support or opposition of a bill which could create doubt of our unified position"*

This communication demonstrates a clear emphasis on unity, consistency, and strategic engagement with legislators, with key objectives outlined in our capstone. The inclusion of shadowing opportunities and guidance on testimony further supports leadership development and organizational alignment.

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## Challenges

The following are our original thoughts on what our challenges would be. The Legislators we reached out to were wonderful and accommodating.

- Legislative timelines are unpredictable, requiring flexibility and persistent outreach.
  - Early and condensed sessions limit opportunities for direct engagement with all legislators.
  - Expanding the project to include reciprocal legislative requests required additional coordination.
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## Lessons Learned

- **Early Engagement is Essential:** Proactive communication prevents misalignment between policy and practice.
- **Collaboration Strengthens Influence:** Unified messaging enhances credibility.
- **Flexibility is Critical:** Adapting to legislative timelines ensures continued engagement.
- **Transparency Builds Trust:** Open communication reinforces public confidence in elections.
- **Proactive Engagement and Legislative Awareness:** One of the strongest lessons, emphasized by a stakeholder and former Indiana Representative, is the power of proactive engagement. Clerks should reach out to their state representatives and lawmakers to build partnerships and friendships, know who serves on legislative committees and caucuses, and not assume issues will resolve themselves. Early communication of red flags and educating lawmakers on the importance of clerk-led legislation and its voter impact is essential.
- **Collaboration and Principled Leadership:** Experiences reinforced the importance of putting the greater good above personal ambition, prioritizing transparency, and upholding democratic processes. These lessons will guide current and future leaders in protecting public trust, promoting accountability, and ensuring that people's interests always come first.

One of the strongest lessons, emphasized by a stakeholder and former Indiana Representative, is the power of proactive engagement. All Clerks should reach out to their state representatives and lawmakers to build partnerships and friendships. Know who serves on your legislative committees and caucuses, and do not assume issues will resolve themselves simply because you trust the process. When red flags appear, communicate early and clearly educate lawmakers on the importance of Clerks' bills and provide frontline insights on how legislation affects voters and election integrity.

We witnessed political implications of policy making, which in practice should have no place in county or state government. As public servants, it is disappointing when politics override the public good, nobody wins, especially the people we have sworn to protect and serve.

We witnessed the power of collaboration and principled leadership. Lawmakers and Clerks came together with a shared commitment to improving processes, strengthening election integrity, and serving the people of Indiana. These experiences have reinforced the importance of putting the greater good above personal ambition, prioritizing transparency, and upholding the democratic process. Ultimately, the lessons learned will guide current and future leaders in protecting public trust, promoting accountability, and ensuring that the people's interests always come first.

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## Conclusion

The Legislative Partnerships capstone project has successfully made a difference in strengthened relationships between Indiana's clerks and state legislators. Through structured engagement, and a partnership with legislators the clerks legislative committee can share vital frontline safeguards and election processes that are effective, as well as identifying areas that need improvement, ensures that clerks can better serve voters and maintain the integrity and accessibility of Indiana elections, clerks are positioned to influence policy for the good and maintain public trust.

Positive legislative interactions demonstrate early success. Upcoming initiatives-including attending the AIC Legislative Conference, collaborating with Clerks Association Legislative Chairs and Committees, and working closely with the AIC Deputy Legislative Director during the current and future legislative sessions will continue to strengthen respectful and productive relationships with legislators.

We believe it is important to share with all Indiana clerks the dedication and hard work of the Association President and board, Legislative Chairs, Legislative Committee, AIC Deputy Legislative Director, and SOS Election Director, whose combined efforts ensure continued progress and support for clerks across the state.

This capstone project was intended to inspire, mend relationships, and promote unity among Clerks and Election Administrators. It was designed to highlight the productive history between Clerks and Legislators by researching and speaking with former clerks from the 1980s as well as

former state representatives. We are also honored to have the current Clerk of the Circuit Court serving as a stakeholder in this project.

Our work focused on the challenges faced over the past several years, the reasons behind those challenges, and potential solutions moving forward. We recognize that this project will remain a fluid document one that continues to evolve with new ideas, educational opportunities, and, most importantly, a shared passion for strengthening cooperation among those who serve the public.

Even as individuals change in positions that influence laws and the voting process, we believe there will always be gatekeepers individuals committed to justice, election integrity, and strong moral values who will continue to advocate for transparency, unity, and the rights of every United States citizen, without political gain.

While we may not win every battle, we believe that unity, evolution, moral leadership, and transparency will ultimately help correct wrongs and serve the greater good.

*"In closing, we feel it is important to reflect on the value of kindness, professionalism, teamwork, transparency, selflessness and respect. Collectively, these six qualities will help ensure a thriving and productive relationship with legislators for the next 40 years."*

*"People come and go, but the work we do to make the world better endures."*

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## **The Road Ahead – Upcoming Milestones and Anticipated Developments**

In February 2026, the entire CEATS project team will attend the Legislative Conference, demonstrating full team participation and commitment. During the conference, the team meet with legislators to express appreciation for their dedication and to continue building respectful, professional relationships. We believe that respect fosters respect returned, and these relationships are essential to strengthening the infrastructure that supports sound legislation, strong communities, engaged constituents, and safe, transparent, and fair elections.

While attending the conference, the team will also visit the Statehouse with experience of special significance. Yvette and Shelley have previously testified at the Statehouse on election-related legislation, and this visit will mark Kris's first time there, a moment that carries lasting meaning and a deep appreciation for the responsibility and impact of public service.

From January through March, the team is considering submitting the capstone for the Cleary Award, with the goal of highlighting the importance and success of collaborative work between election officials and legislators. In parallel, work has begun on a potential grant proposal to secure funding for a summit hosted by the Clerks Association. This summit would bring together legislators, the Secretary of State's office, AIC, and the Indiana Election Division, creating a strong foundation for expanding a working module that could be shared with other states.

Shelley has already initiated outreach to key stakeholders to review legal and ethical eligibility, and feedback from ongoing research and reviews has been overwhelmingly positive. The Cleary Award deadline is February 20, 2026, and the grant application deadline is March 1, 2026.

Looking ahead, the team will remain actively involved in strengthening relationships within the Clerks Association and continuing to build meaningful partnerships with legislators, stakeholders, and partners. We firmly believe that safeguarding and growing these relationships will serve as a cornerstone for generations to come. Unity, trust, and mutual respect in service to the greater good will always remain the guiding principles of dedicated public servants.

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## References

- CEATS team notes/meetings with Indiana Clerks Association President and Past President, Clerks Association Legislative Chairs, Past Board members weigh in and knowledge regarding our Capstone project and legislative updates.
- U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) Local Leadership Conference materials and Idea Lab.
- Commissioner McCormick webinar insights, Phase 1, Session 5.

## Appendix A

### Key Stakeholders

Stakeholder	Role / Contribution
<b>Kathy Williams</b> – Legislative Chair	Former state representative and county clerk; provides legislative strategy and long-term relationships with lawmakers.
<b>Nicole Browne</b> – Legislative Chair	Advocates for clerks’ legislative priorities and engages with legislators.
<b>Kay Kilgore</b> – Past President	Supports upcoming policy alignment and future advocacy efforts.
<b>Lisa Lofgreen</b> – President	Ensures clerk operational realities are represented in legislative discussions.
<b>Michelle Shelton</b> – Prospective Legislative Chair	Liaison between clerks and legislators; monitors legislation and advocates for clerk priorities.
<b>Jessica Bailey</b> – Porter County Clerk	Experienced in bipartisan collaboration and federal election leadership provides statewide perspective.
<b>Amy Rolfes</b>	Amy brings extensive knowledge, strong ambition, and a proven ability to collaborate effectively, especially with legislators. She has established trusted working relationships with local lawmakers and demonstrates a strong commitment to the integrity and importance of the electoral process.
<b>Chris Nancarrow</b> – Allen County Clerk	Brings legal expertise and committee leadership to legislative collaboration.
<b>Dustin Renner</b> – Election Director, SOS	Coordinates statewide election policy and has a good working relationship with lawmakers. Dustin has worked in a County Clerk’s office and with Elections for years and understand the Clerks processes and desire to run an effective election for our constituents and community.
<b>AIC Legislative Team (Camden Murrell, David Bottorff)</b>	Facilitates legislative dialogue, works in the best interest of the Clerks Association, walks through drafts of bills with the Clerks Legislative team. Overall advocate for the Clerks Association.
<b>Indiana Election Division Directors, VSTOP, EAC, CEATS Team</b>	Provide technical, legal, and research expertise to support evidence-based advocacy.

## Appendix B

### Reflection from the CEATS Team

#### Shelley Septer:

As the first third-generation Clerk in Indiana and the daughter of a strong woman who worked at the Statehouse for legislators in her 20s, I feel a deep connection to this project. My mother was one of the Clerks who went to the Statehouse in the 1980s to make a difference by building relationships with legislators—relationships that have lasted for more than 40 years.

Coming to the end of my second term, I have seen so much change in election laws and policies, as well as in the culture of our country. I have had the privilege of serving on the Clerks Association board and working hand in hand with legislators. It has been one of my greatest achievements in life to make a difference in my community and to help educate voters about elections, election integrity, and security.

Having the opportunity to serve on the EAC Local Leadership Committee also helped expand my perspective on elections and reinforced what we are called to do as election administrators. Throughout my career, I have always believed that working collaboratively with legislators is imperative to effectively serve voters.

I hope this project will make a meaningful impact and help strengthen those relationships for generations of Clerks and voters to come.

#### Yvette Runkle:

This project represents a critical bridge between the technical, "frontline" administration of elections and the legislative process that governs them. By formalizing the Legislative Partnerships – Strengthening Elections Capstone, Indiana's clerks are shifting from being purely administrative officers to becoming vital subject-matter experts for the General Assembly.

#### The Impact of Clerks in the Legislative Process

Indiana's 92 Circuit Court Clerks are uniquely positioned because they manage the "boots on the ground" logistics of democracy. The capstone project focuses on translating that experience into policy influence:

- **Frontline Safeguards:** Clerks can provide real-time feedback on election laws—such as voter ID requirements or absentee ballot processing—function in a precinct or voter center setting.

- **Operational Integrity:** By identifying "areas that need improvement," clerks help legislators avoid "unintended consequences" in bill drafting that might otherwise create logistical bottlenecks on Election Day.
- **Public Trust:** When policy is informed by the non-partisan, technical expertise of clerks, it reinforces the transparency and security of the voting process for Hoosier voters.

As a two-term veteran, I know better than anyone that the “learning curve” for a new clerk isn’t just about learning election law – it’s about learning how to defend and improve the laws.

Without a structured partnership like this capstone, many new clerks feel like policy is something that happens to them rather than something they can help shape.

**Kris Bickel:**

I am very thankful to be a part of this capstone with Shelley Septer and Yvette Runkle, between the two of them, they have so much knowledge and strength to make a great team. I feel so blessed to be working in the Clerk’s office, to be part of this amazing team and learning from my peers. Of all my years of working in the Clerk’s office, I have learned so much and working with a strong core of individuals makes me very thankful. I feel this capstone with the help of our stakeholders, that are truly great leaders, will be a great success.

## **Appendix C**

### **Comment from Stakeholders**

#### **Kathy Williams:**

As I write these comments today, I am celebrating my 50<sup>th</sup> year in the County Clerk's office. It has been an honor to serve in local and state government working alongside of hundreds of government officials over the years. Shelley, Yvette and Kris's Capstone Paper addressing the need to work as a team to manage fair and efficient elections takes a lot of work by many. We can't be successful without working together. They address the key issues of sharing our ideas and our expertise as administrators while listening to those who are responsible for guiding policy. They mention the importance of building relationships with all stakeholders to the betterment of the whole. This document will set guidelines for future leaders to continue finding ways to work together for the betterment of the Election Management process. I congratulate Shelley, Yvette and Kris on choosing this as their project and I am honored to be a part of this process for many years.

#### **Nicole Browne:**

Clerk Shelley Septer, Yvette Runkle and Kris Bickel CEATS TEAM's Capstone project is the quintessential entrée to breaking the fourth wall between legislators and stakeholders. Clerk Septer's leadership, commitment and dedication to bringing everyone together is unflinching. We've talked about it. We've hoped for it. It's been the goal stakeholders were always trying to get to. Clerk Septer and team brought it across the finish line...and in the most comprehensive way possible. This is a game changer.

#### **Camden Murrell:**

As a member of the AIC legislative team, this capstone project highlights the value of intentional, early collaboration between county clerks and state legislators. Clerks bring practical, frontline experience to election policy discussions. This capstone project demonstrates how that front line expertise can meaningfully inform policy makers during the legislative process. Consistent communication, building trust, and having a unified approach as an association has contributed to stronger relationships between clerks, lawmakers, and other state partners. From AIC's perspective, this project serves as a strong model for how associations and local officials can work together to support practical policy, reduce unintended consequences, and reinforce public confidence in Indiana's election system and the judicial functions in which clerks play a critical role.

**Kay Kilgore:**

This capstone perfectly captures the progress that clerks have achieved with their legislative relationships while explaining the desire and significance in building and maintaining the relationships necessary to accomplish future desired outcomes beneficial to our voting process. You couldn't have painted a clearer picture of where we were, where we are and where we want to be. Without positive relationships with our legislators, not only would we jeopardize the ability to have any input on bills affecting the clerk's office but also affecting our voter experiences. I truly appreciate and value the ability to discuss and share in this project by being a Stakeholder.

**Jessica Bailey:**

This project exemplifies what true partnership looks like and how public officials should work together on behalf of the people. Taking the time to listen to one another and learn from each other is essential when crafting legislation that directly affects how others carry out their duties. I am thrilled that this project came to fruition and proud of the progress it made on behalf of the Clerk's Association.

**Chris Nancarrow:**

“Elections are critical infrastructure. Clerk Septer’s capstone project provides a tangible framework to ensure that stakeholders throughout the state can collaborate effectively to improve this infrastructure. Elections have become a volatile topic, especially in recent years, and it’s essential to enhance public trust in the process while also averting legislative knee-jerk reactions. Each stakeholder provides a unique perspective to elections and only by sharing our collective knowledge can we critically examine existing practices and proposed improvements.”

**Amy Rolfes:**

Having transitioned from a career in education, I am pleased to contribute to this initiative focused on building legislative partnerships and enhancing election procedures. In my current role as Clerk of St. Joseph County, I have gained insight into the complexities within the election system and the inadvertent procedural obstacles that legislation can create. The Capstone project takes a solutions-oriented approach, aiming to foster meaningful relationships with legislators by providing information and education. This collaborative method is an effective way to address and navigate the operational challenges inherent in election processes.