

# Voting Made Easy in Larimer County, Colorado

By *M. Mindy Moretti, Senior Staff Writer*

This article was published in the *County News, National Association of Counties, Vol 36, No. 21, 11/1/04*

Casting a ballot in an election is the Constitutional right of every U.S. citizen over the age of 18. However, sometimes, being able to cast that ballot isn't always easy because of inconveniently located polling places. That's why, for the first time ever in the country, Larimer County, Colo. used Vote Centers in the Nov. 2003 elections and they plan on using them again this Election Day.

"I didn't have a clue how elections ran when I came out of industry four years ago to be the deputy, and I had always wondered why you could go to a Super Wal-mart and get whatever you wanted, but you couldn't vote where you wanted to," explained Scott Doyle, Larimer County Clerk and Recorder. "So when my predecessor was term-limited, I thought here was an opportunity to try and do something good."

Vote Centers are geographically located throughout the county and are close to heavy traffic areas, larger residential areas and major employers. Unlike precincts, which require voters to vote at the precinct closest to their home, Vote Centers allow residents to vote anywhere in the county.

The county has gone from 143 precincts to approximately 31 Vote Centers. The number of election judges needed has been significantly reduced and the headache on the county's election staff has decreased dramatically.

"An idea like this could have never come to fruition without a magnificent team in this office," Doyle explained. "They took it on as their own and they love it themselves."

The Vote Center concept was a pilot project in the 2003 elections and Doyle received such positive feedback from the community that he worked with the state legislature to make the Vote Centers possible again this election year and in the future. Although there were some initial concerns about the ability of senior citizens or handicapped people to reach the more centrally located Vote Centers, Doyle said he has heard little negative response.

Like precincts, the Vote Centers are located in large public buildings such as schools, churches and even hotels. When a voter enters any of the county's 31 Vote Centers, they walk up to a bank of computers and enter their information where their registration is verified. Voters then proceed to cast their ballots exactly as they did in precincts. Because all the Vote Centers are tied-in together via a computer, Doyle noted that they did not have one incident of someone voting twice in the 2003 election. Doyle and his team have created a system where an election judge can respond to any problem at the Vote Centers within 20 minutes.

Doyle said the Vote Centers have helped his county go a long way to complying with many of the requirements of the Help America Vote Act, things they may have had difficulty with had they continued to use the precinct system.



Although no one can predict what will happen on Election Day 2004, Doyle believes the Vote Centers will help make things more efficient.

"Next Tuesday, all bets are off really," Doyle said with a weary laugh. "I think whether I had 300 precincts or 300 Vote Centers, we're going to have lines. But the Vote Centers should help things go more smoothly."

Although there were some initial costs with the creation of the Vote Centers, Doyle believes that by moving away from the precinct idea

of voting, the county is going to save a lot of money in the long run.

"I can't guarantee you that the cost of elections is going to go down because of the Vote Centers," Doyle said. "But I can tell you that this is going to prevent them from skyrocketing like they otherwise would have."

Doyle sees Vote Centers as the wave of the future in voting. He noted that a handful of Colorado counties will be using the Vote Center concept next election season and he's received calls from other states. Florida, to be exact.

"They called me up and asked if I would work with their legislative folks down there," Doyle explained. "And, I'll be meeting with their election officials in early December."

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(For more information about the Vote Centers, visit [www.larimer.org/elections/vote\\_centers.htm](http://www.larimer.org/elections/vote_centers.htm) or contact Scott Doyle, Larimer County Clerk and Recorder at (970) 498-7852 or via e-mail at [sdoyle@larimer.org](mailto:sdoyle@larimer.org)).

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## **New legislation will divert non-violent mentally ill from jail**

*By Donald Murray, Associate Legislative Director*

This article was published in the *County News, National Association of Counties, Vol. 36, No. 21 November 15, 2004*

Dallas County Commissioner Ken Mayfield spent much of his year as NACo president (2001-2002) crisscrossing the country, highlighting county programs to divert the mentally ill from jail and testifying on Capitol Hill in support of federal legislation that would support jail diversion programs for the mentally ill. Diverting the mentally ill from jail was a priority issue for Mayfield, a former district attorney.

Mayfield's efforts paid off. On Oct. 11, the Senate passed the House version of the Mentally Ill Offender Treatment and Crime Reduction Act of 2004. The legislation, the first truly comprehensive federal measure to promote the diversion of the non-violent mentally ill from jail, was a major priority for NACo, which worked closely with the National Sheriffs' Association, the Council of State Governments and several mental health organizations in designing the legislation.

The measure has been sent to the White House where President George W. Bush is expected to sign the bill into law.

Under the legislation, grants may be used by communities for a variety of purposes, including establishing mental health courts or other diversion programs, creating or expanding community-based treatment programs or providing in-jail treatment and transitional services. In addition, grant funds may be used to enhance training for criminal justice system personnel and mental health system personnel. The bill creates planning and implementation grants, which will enable communities to offer treatment and other services (such as housing, education or job placement) to mentally ill offenders. Programs receiving grant funds must be operated collaboratively by both a criminal justice agency and a mental health agency.

The legislation contains language advanced by NACo to dedicate up to 5 percent of the planning funds for intergovernmental collaboration among elected officials representing municipal, county and state governments. The NACo amendment is designed to promote collaboration within a state among state associations of counties, state municipal leagues and state governments for complimentary statewide initiatives.

In the Senate, a bipartisan coalition led by Sens. Mike DeWine (R-Ohio), the original author of the bill, Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) the chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, and Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), the ranking member mobilized overwhelming support for the bills passage. In the House, Rep. Ted Strickland (D-Ohio) was the original co-author. A former prison psychologist, he took the lead in the House in sponsoring the original legislation, however; Reps. Howard Coble (R-N.C.), chairman of the Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security; Jim Sensenbrenner (R-Wis.),

chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, and Bobby Scott (D-Va.), the ranking member on the subcommittee added their substantial support.



Photo by Tom Goodman

Then-NACo President Ken Mayfield (second from left) meets with officials from Miami-Dade County during one of his trips in 2003 to counties with exemplary programs to divert the mentally ill from jail.

### The Mentally Ill and Jail

According to 1999 study by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, more than 16 percent of persons admitted to county jails each year have a mental illness. In addition, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention reports that more than 20 percent of youth in the juvenile justice system have serious mental health problems, and many more have co-occurring mental health and substance abuse disorders. The Bureau of Justice Statistics study confirmed that mentally ill inmates tend to follow a revolving door, from homelessness to incarceration and then back to the streets. Too many of the individuals do not get adequate treatment and end up being arrested again and again.

Multnomah County, Ore., found that mentally ill defendants stay in jail one-third longer than others. Lengthy incarcerations not only worsen their condition, but almost always guarantee difficulties after their release.

In nearly all states, even a short stay in the county jail is enough to end federal entitlements such as Social Security, veterans' benefits, Medicaid or Medicare for a mentally ill person. Once an individual is released from jail, he or she is eligible to receive such benefits again, but it may take weeks or months for the programs to be restored.

"In many circumstances, arresting the mentally ill individual is an inappropriate response, even if the officer believes that arresting the individual for a criminal charge is appropriate under the circumstances. County jails are not equipped to house a large number of mentally ill offenders. Jails are jails. They are not treatment facilities, nor are they hospitals.

"Jails ought not to be the treatment option of first resort, but sadly, they have become just that because there is nothing else readily available," commented Sheriff Ted Sexton of Tuscaloosa County, Ala., the incoming president of the National Sheriffs' Association.

Some counties have already devised ways to divert the non-violent mentally ill from jail. King County, Wash., for example, has successfully created integrated systems for people with mental illness and other

lines. In the words of former county program administrator David Wertheimer, the experience in King County has demonstrated that the major challenge is creating a new system. "It is a matter of joint planning, pooling resources and more effectively managing resources toward new goals," Wertheimer says.

States are stepping in, too, to help counties remove mentally ill prisoners from jails. California, for example, has invested more than \$150 million in a partnership with county governments through the Mentally Ill Offender Crime Reduction Grant Program, which was designed to help non-violent offenders avoid further involvement with the criminal justice system. Although funding for the program is now being phased out in favor of a new program, preliminary results for the state show that there was a 40 percent reduction in the average number of jail days for individuals receiving the program's enhanced services. There was also a 65 percent decrease in the average number of convictions. In Santa Cruz County, after three years in the program, there was a 96 percent reduction in jail days, and in Los Angeles County, there was a 69 percent decrease."

The new legislation provides several direct benefits to counties.

- First, it will provide funding opportunities for high quality community programs that are more appropriate and effective than jail.
- Second, most federal entitlement programs such as Medicaid, Medicare or Social Security are terminated when the mentally ill enter the jail.
- Third, jail, even under the best of circumstances, is often a traumatizing experience. It often takes county health officials twice as much time to restore the individual to the condition he or she was in when they entered the jail.
- Fourth, jailing the non-violent mentally ill creates a major liability problem. Courts have held counties to a very high standard because these individuals are being locked up against their will. They are totally dependent on the county to provide adequate care, and
- Finally, persons receiving treatment and housing programs that are provided in the community are eligible to receive federal entitlement benefits and most importantly, treatment and housing programs usually get at the cause of the problem.