

Annual Activity Report of the Newport Canvassing Authority 2024

Pursuant to Chapter 2.56.040 of the Newport Code of Ordinances, I respectfully submit the Newport Canvassing Authority's annual report to the Newport City Council. This report summarizes our activities for the calendar year 2024, including a record of attendance for Authority members at each regularly scheduled monthly meeting.

Mission

The mission of the Newport Canvassing Authority is to conduct all elections in the City of Newport in a fair and transparent manner, in accordance with:

- The U.S. Constitution
- The Rhode Island Constitution
- The General Laws of the State of Rhode Island
- Rules and regulations promulgated by the Rhode Island Board of Elections and the Rhode Island Secretary of State

Under the direction of the State Board of Elections, in cooperation with the Secretary of State and with assistance from the Canvassing Department, the Authority maintains an accurate list of registered voters. Additionally, it administers elections fairly, efficiently, and equitably in an open and transparent manner.

The Authority's goal is to ensure that the will of the majority of the City's citizens is accurately voiced in each municipal, state, and federal election.

Canvassing Board

The Canvassing Authority operates under Rhode Island General Law §17-8-1. The Newport City Council appoints a bipartisan Canvassing Authority composed of three (3) qualified electors of the City, with no more than two (2) members belonging to the same political party. Two alternates, one from each party, are also appointed. Members are nominated by the Mayor based on party voter lists submitted by the City's political committee chairpersons.

Current Members:

- **Chairwoman:** Sharon Connors (D)
 - **Member:** Donato Andre D'Andrea (R)
 - **Member:** J. Clement "Bud" Cicilline (D)
 - **Democratic Alternate:** Mary Moniz (D)
 - **Republican Alternate:** Mary Ann Marin (appointed November 2024)
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Canvassing Staffing

Elections Administrator: Hugh Moren leads the Canvassing Office with exceptional dedication and professionalism, supported by an assistant in the role of **Senior Clerk Typist**.

Staffing Challenges: In August 2024, the Canvassing Authority faced a critical disruption when our former Senior Clerk Typist transitioned to a position within the finance team. While her career growth is commendable, her departure during a Statewide Primary and with a Presidential Election looming placed substantial strain on operations.

- **Temporary staffing:** Part-time staff were brought in but required significant oversight.
- **Overtime demands:** Hugh Moren accrued over 225 hours of overtime.
- **Volunteer support:** I personally contributed over 70 hours of unpaid volunteer time to assist with critical election functions, including emergency ballot deliveries, early voting, and poll worker training.

We welcomed a new staff member just days before the election, but it will take several months to complete full training. Her role, classified under union grade U2, is essential to operations but demands advanced expertise. Key responsibilities include:

- Coordinating with the Secretary of State and Board of Elections
- Ensuring compliance with state laws and regulations
- Processing voter registrations and mail ballots
- Recruiting, training, and supervising poll workers
- Supporting all voter-facing operations

Recommendation: Given the high demands and expertise required, we strongly urged the city manager to re-evaluate this position's classification. Over the past 18 months, two Senior Clerk Typists have left for higher-paying roles, underscoring the need for a competitive adjustment to retain qualified staff.

Meetings

The Canvassing Authority meets on the **first Tuesday of each month at 11:30 A.M.** All meetings are posted on the Secretary of State's website at least 48 hours in advance, pursuant to the Open Meetings Act. Unless noted as an Executive Session, all meetings are open to the public.

2024 Highlights

Elections Conducted

The Canvassing Authority successfully administered **three major elections** in 2024:

1. **Presidential Preference Primary** – April 2024
2. **Statewide Primary Election** – September 2024
3. **General Election** – November 2024

- For the Presidential Preference Primary, the Board unanimously voted to combine polling locations due to anticipated low turnout. One polling location per City ward was approved and opened.
- All **9 polling places** were operational for the Statewide Primary and Presidential Elections, including a legally required polling location at City Hall for same-day voter registration and voting for President/Vice President during the General Election.

All locations were approved by the **Board of Elections** and inspected by **Governor's Commission on Disabilities** to ensure compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and U.S. Department of Justice requirements.

Voter Registration

The Canvassing Office processed **1671** new voter registrations in Newport, updated records for party affiliations, name changes, and intra-city moves, and processed approximately **1100** cancellations for voters who moved, passed away, or were otherwise removed as required by law. As of mid-December, Newport's total registered voter population stands at **15,587**.

In line with 2023 legislation, the Canvassing Office completed **two** quarterly updates using National Change of Address (NCOA) data, enhancing voter roll accuracy. This quarterly requirement is paused by law within 90 days of an election.

Poll Worker Recruitment and Training

Poll worker recruitment and training was a major function of the Canvassing Office in 2024. Recruitment started in January and led to the training and hiring of 30 people for the Presidential Preference Primary, 72 people for the Statewide Primary, and 94 people for the General Election. An additional 23 people served as supervisors at City Hall during our 3 early voting periods and a pool of alternates was created for call outs on election day. The Canvassing Office, in conjunction with the State Board of Elections, conducted 9 trainings for Newport's poll workers in 2024. We also conduct an additional 6 refresher sessions around the Presidential Preference Primary and General Election.

Outreach efforts successfully diversified the poll worker pool, with significant increases in **bilingual** staff and representation across age groups. Training sessions provided comprehensive, hands-on education for all poll workers.

Mail Ballots and Early Voting

- **2293 mail ballot applications** were processed for the three elections in 2024. This includes 308 mail ballots for service members and U.S. citizens abroad.
- Early voting, codified under the Let RI Vote Act (2022), saw **4341 voters or 28.4% of eligible Newport** voters casting ballots at City Hall during the 20 days preceding the General Election. This trend has reduced Election Day wait times significantly.

Challenges: The temporary relocation of early voting to the basement due to elevator issues created operational difficulties for both staff and voters. Addressing space concerns remains a priority for future elections.

Community Outreach and Security

The Authority and election staff expanded community outreach efforts:

- Collaborated with Salve Regina University, League of Women Voters, and local organizations to boost voter participation.
- Launched the “**How to Run for Office**” program to guide prospective candidates.

Increased scrutiny on election integrity nationwide necessitated enhanced security measures. We secured a **state grant** to fund police details at polling locations for the Presidential Election, ensuring safety for voters, staff, and infrastructure.

Statewide Collaboration

Chairwoman Sharon Connors led the **Statewide Board of Canvassers Working Group**, uniting Boards of Canvassers to:

- Collaborate on shared challenges
- Exchange vital election information
- Improve election processes statewide

This initiative has strengthened cooperation between local Boards, the Secretary of State, and the State Board of Elections.

Future Goals

1. Enhance Board Member education and training to improve support during early voting and Election Day.
 2. Address staffing and space challenges to ensure smooth election administration.
 3. Continue outreach programs to increase voter participation and poll worker recruitment.
 4. Strengthen partnerships with local law enforcement and statewide agencies to safeguard elections.
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Conclusion

The Newport Canvassing Department, led by Hugh Moren and supported by Karyn Whitaker, remains a dedicated and cohesive team. Their professionalism benefits the Canvassing Authority, candidates, voters, and the public.

Respectfully submitted,

Sharon Connors, Chair
Newport Canvassing Authority