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Statewide voter registration system hits roadblocks in Texas

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Hiccups in a new centralized voter database system in Texas are bogging down the registration process and ejecting eligible voters from the rolls, say local election officials.

The database, called the Texas Election Administration Management system (TEAM) went live in January, allowing election workers in 224 counties to log on over the Internet to input voter registration applications. The applications are checked against voter driver's license numbers and Social Security numbers, and the results of the searches are sent back to the counties.

The TEAM system was also built to store voter lists for the counties.

Since January, county elections officials have flooded the state with complaints about the system, particularly its poor performance. The complaints have increased markedly since local elections were held throughout the state on May 12.

"Technology should improve our productivity, not create unnecessary additional burdens," said Cheryl Johnson, the Galveston County tax assessor collector, who has issued a number of formal complaints about TEAM's performance and its problems in retrieving historical records.

In some cases, TEAM has required that workers get voter data from other sources, often a time-consuming process, Johnson said. "TEAM has adversely impacted productivity in the Galveston County Voter Registrar's Office as well as negatively impacted many of our voters," she said.

The \$14 million TEAM system was built by IBM using an Oracle Corp. database and a Java-based registration management application from Hart InterCivic Inc., an Austin-based elections and records management software maker. The TEAM system runs on Solaris-based hardware from Sun Microsystems Inc.

The system was built to let local workers enter voter data in a single centralized, statewide database that conforms to the federal Help America Vote Act (HAVA), according to a spokesman for Texas Secretary of State Roger Williams. HAVA dictates all states have a central voter registration repository.

About 30 counties continue to maintain a local database of voters, rather than depend on TEAM, while also sending the data to the statewide database, he said.

The spokesman for Williams acknowledged that the system had some problems during the early voting process for the May 12 election but said most were resolved by Election Day.

"The database performed well on Election Day, and response time has improved dramatically," he said. "We will continue to work to improve performance, but we feel the system is moving in the right direction."

The IBM spokesman acknowledged that "as with any new application deployment, work was required to optimize the solution based on actual usage patterns."

Nevertheless, four county officials this week contended that the TEAM system still has serious flaws. "We're frustrated," said Candy Arth, president of the Tax Assessor-Collector Association of Texas and the tax assessor-collector for Washington County. "Everyone has been."

Arth said members of her staff in Washington County say that the process of entering names into the TEAM system can take minutes when it should only take "nanoseconds."

Officials said the TEAM system promised to allow workers to enter 40 voter names into the system at a time, but the sessions often time out, forcing the process to begin anew. Therefore, she said, workers have to limit the number of names entered, costing the county thousands of dollars in overtime to complete the work.

Paul Bettencourt, tax assessor-collector of Harris County, which includes the city of Houston, called for the state to conduct a strong review of the performance of the system during the recent election to examine the response-time issues and determine why some eligible voters are being dropped.

Because of the problems with TEAM, Bettencourt oversees elections in one of the counties that continue to use a local database in addition to TEAM. "With its current performance, [the system is] unusable in a major county," he said. In some cases, he said, Harris County has had to resubmit voter applications three or four times before they are validated by the TEAM system, Bettencourt said.

After the close of the May 12 election, there are 100 provisional ballots that need to be verified in Harris County, including about 12 that Bettencourt blamed on problems with TEAM. He said the county is still counting votes in some very close races that could be affected by any flaws in TEAM.

Williams' spokesman contends that TEAM has never kicked anyone off the rolls.

Not all county officials were critical of the system's performance this month. Ro'Vin Garrett, tax assessor-collector of Brazoria County, said TEAM did "fine" during the election. "There are some [performance] bugs, but when worked out, it will be a great system," she said.