

The Roanoke Times

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Registrars say system has glitches

As next month's election looms, many say the statewide voter database is a major headache.

By [Jay Conley](#)

981-3114

DID YOU KNOW?

- The voter registration deadline is 5 p.m. Tuesday. (Monday is a holiday.)

How to register

IN PERSON

- Bring either a photo ID or a previous voter registration card to your registrar's office.

OTHER WAYS

- You can obtain an application at government offices, libraries, the Department of Motor Vehicles and online. Complete the application and file it with your local registrar, or mail it to the address on the form.

ONLINE FORMS

- www.sbe.virginia.gov

HOW TO CONTACT YOUR REGISTRAR

- Roanoke: 853-2281
- Roanoke County: 463-7203
- Salem: 375-3034

Voter registrars in the Roanoke Valley and beyond are looking toward next month's election with trepidation.

That's because the implementation of a federal voting law designed to improve the accuracy of the election process may be doing just the opposite in Virginia.

In February the State Board of Elections upgraded its computerized voter registration system to comply with a mandate from the Help America Vote Act. The federal law called for all states to create a statewide interactive voter database.

While Virginia has had such a network for 30 years, it needed to be upgraded.

Since February, local registrars say the new computer system, called the Virginia Election and Registration Information System has been rife with glitches.

"We've all had some problems with it," said Judy Stokes, Roanoke County's voter registrar. "It doesn't do all the things that it really should do."

Phyllis Dierschow, Botetourt County's voter registrar, said she's had one problem after another with the new system. She said complaints made to the State Board of Elections have been met with suggestions that she needs to better embrace change and get more training.

Dierschow said VERIS simply doesn't work right and is creating inaccuracies. "We have a system that registrars are ashamed of," she said.

Nancy Rodrigues, who was appointed secretary of the State Board of Elections in September, acknowledged that VERIS has a range of software problems and said the board has hired additional staff to address registrars' concerns.

She noted, however, that no major problems were reported during the June primary.

- Bedford County: 586-7649
- Bedford: 586-7649
- Botetourt County: 473-8235
- Franklin County: 483-3025
- Montgomery County: 382-5741
- Radford: 731-3639

"We have been working with this software and we are doing everything humanly possible to try to ensure that this election will go off as well as the primary went off," Rodrigues said.

Tuesday is the deadline for Virginians to register to vote in the Nov. 6 general election. After that, registrars will compile poll books listing all the registered voters in their localities based on information from the statewide network.

But the accuracy of those books could be compromised by the glitches, some registrars have said.

State election officials say they're aware of how important it is for the books to be as accurate as possible.

"There's a lot of testing and quality assurance that goes into those poll books before they ever get sent out," said James Alcorn, director of information technology for the State Board of Elections.

Registrars' offices in seven localities contacted Thursday acknowledged they've had problems with software glitches that have either increased their workload or caused them to question the accuracy of election information.

Sheri Iachetta, Charlottesville's registrar, said the city's electoral board also has complained to the State Board of Elections and warned Charlottesville's elected officials to expect problems with voters.

There are a range of glitches that have registrars concerned. Some cited Thursday include problems with recording absentee ballots, removing recently deceased Virginia residents from the statewide system and generating duplicate letters to the same voters.

"It's been a frustrating year," said Barbara Gunter, Bedford County's registrar.

Gunter recently removed a convicted felon's name from the system because he was ineligible to vote. The computerized system is programmed to automatically generate a letter to a person with an updated voting status.

But when Gunter went to the printer, she found 180 copies of the same letter. When she told the state board about the glitch, she said she was told there was no way to alleviate the error. Instead, she was told to delete the unnecessary letters before printing.

A state official said Thursday that problem should have been addressed and fixed this week.

"We have been working to try to resolve whatever the glitches are coming up," Rodrigues said. "Some of it has been a training problem, and we've tried to address that ... And some of it is the fixes that we've been trying to do."

But registrars say even as soon as one glitch is fixed, another occurs.

"It's almost a daily thing of finding problems," Gunter said of the new system.

Dierschow ran into problems in Botetourt County when she tried to generate new voter registration cards for about 780 county residents in the Amsterdam, Rainbow Forest and Cloverdale precincts. The county had been providing voting machines and election officials to operate split precincts in those areas for the 17th and 19th House of Delegates districts in the Virginia General Assembly. When Dierschow went to notify the affected voters that the split precincts had been eliminated for the upcoming election, she discovered that the statewide system was incorrectly generating new voter cards for voters outside those districts, and not generating new cards for some voters within the districts.

Some registrars also say the new system has created a lot more work for them because they constantly have to verify if the system is recording accurate information.

Other registrars, however, say they're rolling with the new system's punches.

"I can't say that there aren't issues. But the bottom line is this is a new program, and any time you introduce a new program, you're going to have glitches that frustrate you," said Randall Wertz, Montgomery County's registrar and the president of the Voter Registrars Association of Virginia.

Virginia Sanders, who became Pittsylvania County's registrar July 1, said she may not be as frustrated with the new system as some longer-serving registrars.

"I can't be too critical of it because I didn't know the old system," she said.

Sanders has had problems but said the state board has been responsive.

"I'm one of those eternal optimists anyway," she said. "I think it's all going to work out on Election Day."

Staff writer Mason Adams contributed to this report.

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