



[www.jsonline.com](http://www.jsonline.com) | [Return to regular view](#)

**Original Story URL:**

<http://www.jsonline.com/story/index.aspx?id=573003>

## Voting system tallies trouble

### Election officials say new database not trustworthy

By ANNYSA JOHNSON and PATRICK MARLEY  
[anjohnson@journalsentinel.com](mailto:anjohnson@journalsentinel.com)

*Posted: March 4, 2007*

Two days a week, Joanne Pelczynski leaves her job in the Wauwatosa city clerk's office to undergo physical therapy for a painful case of tennis elbow.

Pelczynski hasn't picked up a racket in 35 years. She attributes the injury instead to the six hours a day she wades through Wisconsin's cumbersome, new voter registration system.

Local election officials around the state are criticizing that computer software, still not fully functional a year after missing a federal deadline, as unreliable, maddeningly slow and unnecessarily complex.

It's difficult to pinpoint who is at fault. Congress, state officials, a software firm, consultants and local clerks played a role in deciding what the database must do, building and maintaining it and training workers to run it.

But it's clear that trying to implement the \$27.5 million system has been a nightmare for those on the front lines. And many are blaming the software vendor, Accenture.

Neil Albrecht, assistant director of the Milwaukee Election Commission, described the mood of many clerks around the state as "profound frustration."

"The system is so complex - there are so many different functions - it makes it difficult to determine if even the basic functions are being covered," Albrecht said. "The more complex the system, the greater the opportunity for error."

More than a few election officials around the state have suggested that Wisconsin should sever its ties with Accenture, as the four other states that contracted with the firm have done.

"Why will no one stand up and say we've made a mistake?" said Wauwatosa Deputy Clerk Bernadette Williams, who is retiring in October rather than face the 2008 presidential election with the new system.

Accenture says it has done just what the state asked.

"Fact is, Accenture delivered the (voter) software to the (State Elections Board) and three statewide elections have been successfully run on the program," Accenture spokesman Jim McAvoy said in a statement.

Kevin Kennedy, executive director of the board, acknowledged that the new system is causing frustration for clerks because it is more complex than the systems local governments previously maintained. But he said the state database is far superior because it can track voters as they move from one city to another and more easily identifies people who try to vote twice.

Congress ordered all states in 2002 to build statewide voter lists to help avoid the uncertain poll results that clouded the 2000 presidential election. The deadline was Jan. 1, 2006.

Wisconsin, which started using its system last year, is one of 11 states that have yet to fully comply, according to [www.electionline.org](http://www.electionline.org), a Web site that tracks election issues. Kennedy said he expects the new system to be complete by February.

Building the database is expected to cost \$27.5 million, with \$14.1 million of that going to Accenture. The state has paid the firm about \$8.9 million so far. The project is almost entirely federally funded.

Local clerks describe a system so unwieldy that it takes 10 keystrokes to accomplish what one did previously. Every function has multiple layers and screens, and one false step can lead to disaster, they say.

Some of the most troubling problems with the project involve the absentee ballot function, which in the November election allowed the Milwaukee Election Commission to mail multiple ballots to more than 200 voters and to come perilously close to failing to mail 700 others.

Elections Board spokesman Kyle Richmond said the board would ask Accenture to create a pop-up warning if more than one absentee ballot request were put in the system for a voter.

Milwaukee's near failure to mail 700 absentee ballots was the result of a keyboarding error that went unnoticed until voters called looking for their ballots. Wauwatosa experienced a similar situation in which the misstep would have resulted in the printing of a blank poll book. In both cases, there was no indication anything was amiss, and they were saved by tech troubleshooters hired by the state.

Brookfield City Clerk Kris Schmidt has tried repeatedly to use the absentee ballot component of the new software only to give up. The last time, it began printing labels for voters who hadn't asked for ballots.

"We just couldn't trust the data we were getting to send to the polling places," she said.

The clerks acknowledge the system's merits - the ability to transfer voter records statewide and to track fraud - and laud the state's training efforts. And not everyone is so discouraged. Franklin Clerk Sandi Wesolowski, who worked briefly for Kennedy and sits on a federal election standards board, said, "In the long run, it's going to be very beneficial for the state."

But local election officials say they are dreading the 2008 presidential election, and many are maintaining parallel databases for certain functions.

Their fear is that the system will create the very thing it was intended to avoid: unreliable election results.

"Our greatest responsibility is to run a fair and efficient election," Schmidt said. "We're afraid it will create problems we won't be able to solve and it will ruin an election."

*JSOnline.com For tales from the front line in dealing with the new system, see [jsonline.com/links](http://jsonline.com/links).*

[Buy a link here](#)

From the March 5, 2007 editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel  
Have an opinion on this story? [Write a letter to the editor](#) or start an [online forum](#).

Subscribe today and receive 4 weeks free! [Sign up now](#).

© 2006, Journal Sentinel Inc. All rights reserved. | Produced by [Journal Interactive](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)  
Journal Sentinel Inc. is a subsidiary of [Journal Communications](#).