

An exploratory assessment for Barr Foundation

Exploring the feasibility of a Massachusetts-based project to improve civic and elections participation

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Exploring the civic scene in Gateway Cities

Can collaboration between election clerks and community organizations improve civic engagement, help elections offices be more responsive to community needs, and increase civic participation among historically underrepresented groups?

In early 2021, the Barr Foundation and the Center for Civic Design began discussing a project to explore this question. Although CCD has worked simultaneously with elections offices and community groups in the past, those relationships often started when the election office made an introduction. This project goes further. It takes a 360° approach where we intentionally and independently build relationships with both community groups and election offices, seeking to understand their differing approaches to increasing civic participation in diverse communities. Our goal was to identify an opportunity for a Massachusetts-based project in 2022.

We spent three months learning about the elections landscape in Gateway Cities, and ultimately narrowed our focus to Haverhill, Lowell, Springfield, and Worcester. Gateway Cities are important epicenters in the state, as well as microcosms of the increasing demographic diversity in the US. All face challenges of aging infrastructures and changing economics, but are also small enough to lack the robust networks of a large city.

We talked with leaders from 8 statewide civic organizations, 10 local community leaders, and 3 election administrators to learn the challenges and needs of both local elections offices and community based-organizations. We hoped to identify ways to work in these hub cities as a starting point for raising civic participation - first in those cities, then across the state.

Conversations started on Zoom and phone, but many of our most valuable insights came from a one-week trip. We saw communities in the middle of the fall election cycle, attended campaign and voter education events, and visited bustling city clerk offices. Some offices said that they were swamped but would welcome speaking to us in 2022. Others were more than happy to speak now. As one city clerk said:

"I'm glad somebody wants to hear what I have to say. Cause you know, I've got a lot to say."

What we learned

Through interviews and site visits, we learned about the complex interconnected social systems that influence voting and voter engagement in Gateway Cities. This section explores the range of challenges — from direct voter-facing challenges to larger structural barriers — impacting economic and social life beyond voting.

In our analysis, we identified 6 major themes that connected the issues across the cities. We have tagged insights and quotes to make these themes visible within this report.

Civic education and participation	Language Access	Infrastructure
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Learning the US civic system through civic education• Civic attitudes and sense of belonging• Outreach for BIPOC communities, new and returning citizens, and youth engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Access to services and materials in the language(s) a voter is most fluent in• Includes spoken language, as well as terminology and forms of communication that resonates with a community or lived experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The services and facilities for a community to function• Physical infrastructure• Sociopolitical context such as institutional realities, trust in systems, and policing
Intracommunity	Election administration	COVID-19
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Informal networks of knowledge• Resources and needs that shape elections for everyone	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Issues and attitudes by, and towards, clerks• Challenges of running elections• Funding and resource needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reality underlying all our conversations• Impacted everything and exacerbated longstanding tensions

Language access and forms of communication were both common themes in conversations about barriers to running for office for BIPOC (Black and Indigenous People of Color) candidates, civic education and outreach material, and targeted training for multilingual poll workers.

Our insights came from conversations with people from three key groups: election offices, state-wide organizations, and local leaders and organizations that either focus on voting explicitly or include civic engagement as a part of their work in the local community. While interview quotes are anonymous, we have identified participants by role to add context to our conversations.

Insight 1 There is a disconnect between perceptions of Massachusetts and lived experiences

Again and again, we heard people talk about a gap between external perceptions and internal reality. Common refrains included statements to the effect that even though Massachusetts is known as a “democratic stronghold,” things happen that “don’t reflect democratic values and practices” or “If it happens in Massachusetts, then you know it’s worse in other states.”

Civic education and participation **Infrastructure** **Election administration**

“The partisan bias isn’t the problem...when you take out partisanship and deal with the problems, you see them in real ways” - former elected official

"Massachusetts is a centrist state with pockets of progressivism" - community organizer

“The state actually is more conservative in trying new things, changing. [There is] a professional political class that likes to keep control.” - state-wide organization

Insight 2 It’s “easy” to vote, but that doesn’t mean people do

Even when there are few examples of overt voter suppression, potential voters may not feel invited to participate—especially when they cannot see either the impact of their vote or a government that reflects their community.

Civic education and participation **Election administration**

"The election office is all white. You have the handbook that gives you information. But what about the system itself, does it invite people to vote?" - state-wide organization

"In 2018, I saw a map of voter turnout. Springfield is 53% turnout. Holyoke was 11 points higher. Springfield is the only majority-black community in Western Mass. Every other community is 80/90% turnout." - clerk

Insight 3 Pathways to citizenship don't lead to the voting booth

Community leaders mentioned that voting is not always a priority for new and returning citizens. They also mentioned existing opportunities to connect immediate priorities with voting within their communities but lacked appropriate material to do.

Civic education and participation **Intracommunity** **Election administration**

"What really floored me is that 90% of legal residents don't become citizens. So 90% of immigrants that can have a voice in our elections, don't." - state-wide organization

"A lot of Chinatown folks don't really care about politics and civics. Community leaders have a strong influence in Chinatown. Not a lot of them [Chinatown residents] understand the system, but they trust the community leaders. It happens in my family." - Community-level advocate

(Talking about an American citizen who doesn't speak much English and doesn't vote.) "Language is not the barrier. I don't think he sees that as important. Voting is not that important to him." - community organization

"People that have been institutionalized face a set of challenges of returning to society. Voting falls lower on the spectrum of need." - community organizer

Insight 4 There is a dearth of quality civic education, but no clear consensus on how to address it

Community leaders felt that more voter and civic education is needed but acknowledged that election offices had little ability to do more.

Civic education and participation **Infrastructure** **Election administration**

"Voting doesn't take tons of skills, but to access and have conversations in the lead up to voting, media literacy, fact vs. fiction - those are skills. That matters when it comes to [voting]" - state-wide organization

"When I think particularly about the Latino community, there isn't targeted outreach to remind people to vote or provide info to make an informed [decision]. I don't think the average constituent has a relationship with the elections department except for getting a letter in the mail that they might be taken off the voter roll. Most people don't know the city clerk, probably aren't aware that there is an elections department." - elected official

"Our election offices don't have the resources. They'll put the mechanical sign in the city of Lawrence 'vote tomorrow'. What resources do they have to do more than that?" - state-wide organization

Insight 5 City and Town clerks are under-resourced and overworked

As in many small cities across the country, much of Massachusetts' election administration is run by either city clerks who "wear different hats" in local government, or part-time town clerks. They operate on small budgets, and legislative changes rarely come with enough funding to implement new policies well.

Infrastructure Election administration

"So I know that the state doesn't like to give up the money...but they're constantly creating new rules, new mandates for us to follow, and there's no money behind it." - city clerk

"Without the Facebook grant, we can't pay for postage, like all this stuff coming out of the state legislature. They want the city to pay all the mail and voting of in-person early voting on Election Day operation. " - city clerk

"There's only one of me. So it's really hard to do individualized training [for poll workers], which is what I'd really like to do." - city clerk

Insight 6 Clerks don't have access to ongoing, hands-on training

During covid, the Secretary of the Commonwealth began offering webinars and other online trainings that clerks found helpful, but those petered out after 2020. Clerks said that they mostly learn on the job or sign up for one-time classes at conferences.

Infrastructure **Election administration**

"There used to be a manual [that was] 8 volumes long. It is not published anymore. People trade around copies, and no one has a full set." - city clerk

"I am lucky that my town pays for [training]. Some [clerks] pay for it out of pocket. They are not accessible. They are one-time lectures, not classes. Especially when it comes to certificates, I want to practice, and be able to mess up without that affecting a real-life situation." - city clerk

Insight 7 New candidates often don't have enough support running for office

Elected officials and community organizations pointed to running for office as a way to change the system, but also said that a gap in understanding how to run for office is a barrier.

Civic education and participation **Infrastructure** **Election administration**

"Not only are they [city council/school board] not representative, but people don't want to run for them because they have to run citywide — lower-income [individuals] don't have the resources to run a citywide campaign." - state-wide organization

"The [voter] database was \$2,000. When I first ran, we built our own because we couldn't afford the one from the party." - former elected official

Insight 8 BIPOC candidates spend significant time educating their communities on civic matters

Elected officials reported the lack of civic education amongst BIPOC communities results in an additional challenge for BIPOC candidates, who must simultaneously run a campaign and educate their communities on the importance of voting.

Civic education and participation **Intracommunity** **Infrastructure** **Election administration**
Language Access

"The first layer was education, then trying to find an issue that they could clearly conceptualize as something that affects them." - elected official

"I would go door knocking and spend hours sitting down and explaining what a state legislature even is." - former elected official

These insights are not unique to the cities we looked at or to Massachusetts. And that's a good thing. That means there are creative solutions in the works across the country to draw from, and an opportunity to develop new solutions that can be scaled up or replicated across the state and country. But it won't be easy. The changing demographics in these cities and the challenge of building relationships between community groups and underfunded elections offices compound to create an ecosystem deserving of care and attention. It is particularly timely for improving civic and election participation in the state.

Recommendations

We recognize that we cannot fix everything, but we *can* address issues we heard across all the themes through our work to help elections communicate and serve voters better. We believe that election offices want to do this more effectively and are interested in support. In addition to basic tools and skills, bringing organizations and government together makes the community stronger. Because of this, our recommendations center on building connections between the community and the city governments to increase trust and turnout by using collaboration to bridge gaps.

“Immigrants need that trust and bonding. It's not the information you give them, it's about trust, how you mobilize this community.” - community leader

Election clerks need better training and resources for voter outreach.

In line with our experience providing technical assistance to election offices and the Center for Tech and Civic Life report about the use of **COVID-19 Response Grants** in the 2020 election, the lack of training, skills, and resources is a barrier to improving voter outreach. This is especially true for new citizen communities who need both civic education and effective outreach in their languages. It is also vital when explaining changes in election procedures, including redistricting and shifting to ward-based elections. Meeting this need requires:

- Project-based training on election design that supports clerks in raising their skills while updating their websites and other outreach materials.
→ CCD has conducted this approach of pairing training with small projects in Rhode Island, Wisconsin, Virginia, and Oregon.

- Tools and templates for materials like Pocket Guides for Voters, websites, and updated forms, customized for Massachusetts and available throughout the state.
 - CCD is currently working in Vermont on tools and templates for their vote-by-mail materials.

Potential candidates need information about how to run for office

We heard from first-time candidates of color who had struggled to navigate the system. They didn't know what resources their city clerk's office had to offer. They also said they had to do basic civic education instead of talking about their campaign priorities. Many jurisdictions and community groups across the country run training for candidates; Lowell Votes has a robust program that could be a model.

- A better manual and training for running for office, designed to be used by both the clerks and community groups, would provide trusted information and make it easier for first-time candidates to run for local office.

More collaboration is needed between election clerks and community groups on language access to better reach would-be voters.

The lack of resources affects language access, especially in communities where the Voting Rights Act does not require it but is needed for new citizens. Haverhill's election clerk specifically wants to do more outreach to Latinx voters but doesn't know where to start. In Lowell, community groups are picking up the slack but aren't being compensated for their work. Stronger collaboration with the community will provide a broader reach and improve the quality of the materials. This can be addressed through:

- Language access planning training for election officials focused on a layered approach that supports collaboration with the community.
 - The CCD workshop can be customized for Massachusetts and these small cities.
- A community-clerk collaboration to develop a guide for new voters, translated into Spanish and other languages (including Khmer and Cantonese) that can be easily adapted for each jurisdiction.
 - CCD has worked in states like Michigan, Virginia, and Pennsylvania on a Pocket Guide for Voters that could be the basis for this work.

- Setting up other collaborations, including language access advisory committees (a requirement in California) and projects like bilingual student poll worker programs. Worcester has a well-developed bilingual student poll worker program. Haverhill has the beginnings of one, which can be used as models in other cities and throughout the state.
 - CCD is currently creating a guide to setting up a program with input from election offices around the country.

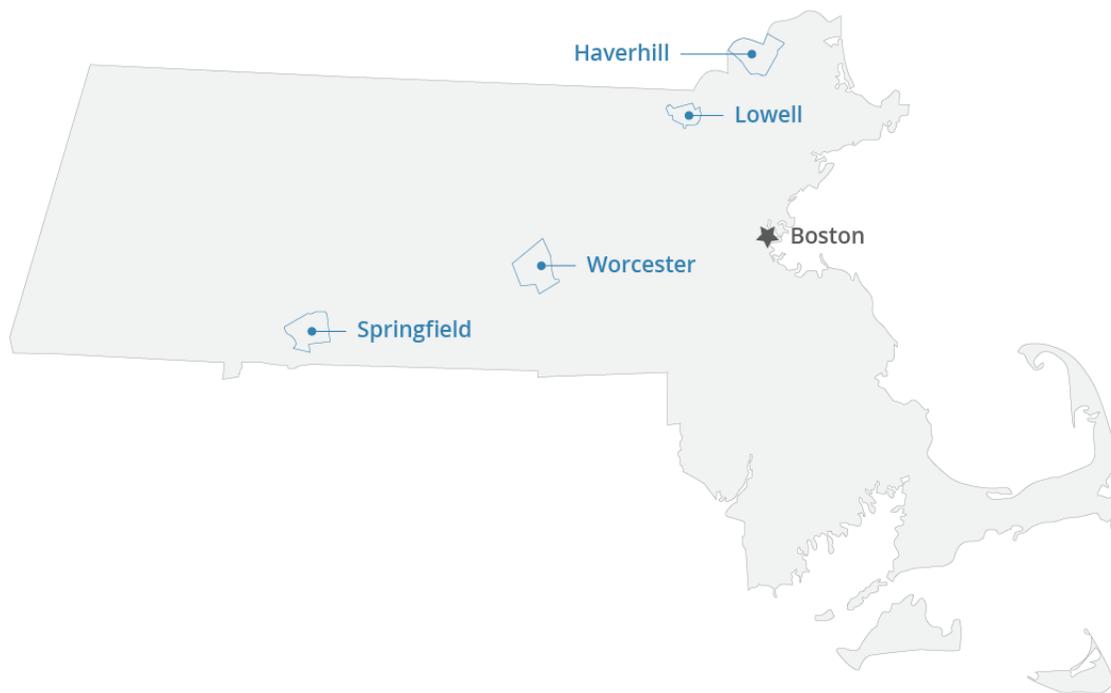
Stronger relationships between election clerks and the community are needed to help both serve their cities better.

The Massachusetts Voter Table runs a “take your clerk to lunch” program. This program is a great start, and could be expanded to focus on voter outreach and local election administration issues, especially around changes in elections like a switch from at-large to ward-based elections or the introduction of voting by mail or recruiting election workers. This would also provide a stronger connection between statewide and local groups.

- Workshops and other in-person events help everyone get to know each other and work together to identify priority needs for elections and voters help.
 - Past CCD experience includes cross-sector work in California with Future of California Elections, accessible design workshops for EAC/NIST, and other collaborations with local teams for automatic voter registration.

How we worked

We interviewed election clerks, community leaders, and state-wide organizations and attended civic events in the four Gateway Cities: Haverhill, Lowell, Springfield, and Worcester.

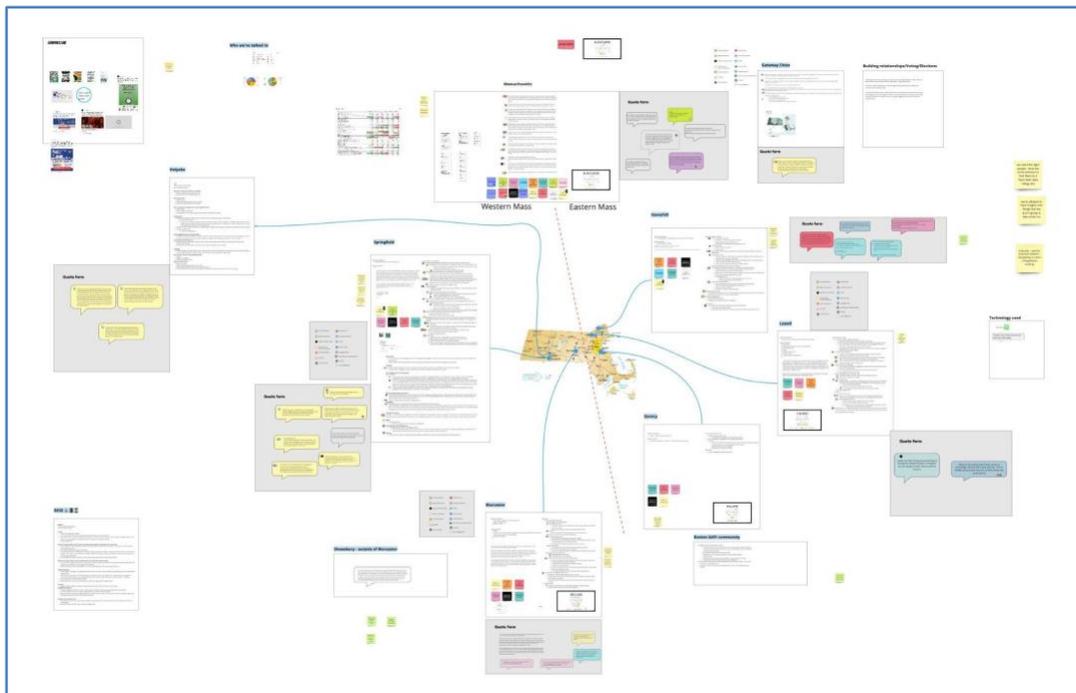


Our activities included:

- **Background research** on each city through whitepapers and news media to understand civic engagement and participation in the context of the city's civic infrastructure, Massachusetts at large, and barriers to voting faced by historically disenfranchised communities.
- **Interviews** with 21 people between August 12, 2021, and October 23, 2021. This included election offices (3), local organizations and community leaders (10), and statewide civic groups (8). We spoke with people who lived in Boston, Brighton, Haverhill, Holyoke, Lowell, Quincy, Shutesbury, Springfield, and Worcester.

- **Site visits** during the week of October 17-21, 2021, to Haverhill, Lowell, and Worcester. Initially, we planned to hold an in-person workshop, but between covid, the election, and redistricting, we decided to forgo a workshop and instead meet one-on-one with folks.
- **Attended online and in-person(*) civic events**
 - Haverhill Voting Rights Presentation
 - Ninth Annual Gateway Cities Innovation Awards and Summit
 - Haverhill League of Women Voters candidate forum
 - Worcester YWCA School Committee Candidate Forum*
 - Lowell Votes canvassing event*
 - Pioneer Valley Project Candidate Night
 - Cambodian Mutual Aid Association Community Block Party, Meet your candidates, Lowell*

After all the information gathering, we **created a digital affinity map** to help us better contextualize our information. Our affinity map included news stories, multimedia clips, research articles, pictures, quotes from stakeholder interviews, and names of active civic organizations in each city. Noticing overlapping barriers, we created 16 themes, which then coalesced into the 6 themes included in this report.



City Profiles

We started by learning about and speaking with leaders from several Gateway Cities and then narrowed our focus to Haverhill, Lowell, Springfield, and Worcester. We wanted to learn more about specific issues these cities face, how they related to national issues of trust and participation in this extraordinary year, and which community groups are active leaders in the civic space. We believe that these cities will make a good starting point for work in 2022 because many of the issues identified in our interviews match CCD's skills and areas of work.

"Many of the issues we're having nationwide, we feel in a micro way." - elected official

While this quote was about Haverhill, it could be said about any of these cities. Gateway Cities are epicenters of change, home to multicultural communities, and liminal spaces where new ideas butt up against tradition—like much of the US.

One example of this playing out in a local context is the ongoing discussion around representation in governance. All four cities have experienced an increase in population size and racial and ethnic diversity. This has led to a change, sometimes spurred by legal action against the city, in the cities' representation structures. Historically, each city's electorate chose representatives on an "at-large" basis, a practice community leaders say dilutes the voices of residents of color. In contrast, ward-based election structures allow for greater representation of the entire city.

Other commonalities include:

The geography of the state affects these cities

The further Gateway Cities are from Boston, the less attention they get. This applies to resources in all areas of life, including funding for civic engagement initiatives, media coverage and infrastructure. Resources were described as "Boston-centric."

Infrastructure

"What happens is that really cool exciting programs start up, but they only reach Boston, with the idea that it will trickle out because it is a small state. It is an old joke in western mass that Boston forgets us." - clerk

"There's a big divide in getting resources to western mass. There's a lot more people in eastern mass." - statewide organization

The "small-town spirit" remains even when a place is no longer small

This can make it hard to break in as a new voice. "Parochial" was used to describe these communities in multiple conversations. A challenge for newcomers is that the human infrastructure of civics tends to be people who know each other.

Intracommunity

"Everybody loves their towns in [New England]. And like, they just want their control. And like, you know, it's like a very, there's a very parochial place in that regard." - community organizer

"Every place has its own little way of doing things. And we all follow the law. But you know, every place has its own flavor." - city clerk

Changing demographics aren't reflected yet in government

This is a time of transition for Massachusetts, and particularly the Gateway Cities. Statewide, 23.8% of the population speaks a language other than English at home, but the number is often higher in the Gateway Cities (42.1% in Lowell, 39.1% in Springfield, 34.6% in Worcester).¹ In comparison to statewide numbers, Gateway Cities are often more demographically diverse, have lower median incomes, more renters, and higher percentage of people living in poverty.

Intracommunity Civic education and participation Language Access

"People who used to live in historically redlined neighborhoods in Boston just cannot buy homes in those neighborhoods anymore, so if they try to buy, they go all the way to [Gateway Cities]." - statewide organization

"[There's a] historically big gap between who serves and who is part of the community" - former elected official

¹ [Census Quick Facts](#)

Haverhill

64,014

Population²

21.9%

Homes with a language other than English³

42.9%

Renter occupied home units⁴

Change is coming to Haverhill. Despite being one of the smaller Gateway Cities, this “city that thinks it’s a small town” also has a growing Latinx electorate and simmering tension between “old” and “new”. City elections are currently at-large, but voters said ‘yes’ to a non-binding November 2021 ballot question to change to ward-based. All city council candidates in a League of Women Voters candidate forum said that they would support the measure. As one interviewee put it, it’s “pretty obvious that things have to change.”

Key community organizations



What we heard

“[Haverhill has an] old sewage system. When it rains a lot, it literally dumps shit into the river. Talk about getting into some deep shit.” - elected official

Infrastructure

"When I think about Haverhill latino coalition - it's not a nonprofit, it's a group of leaders that come together [...] Group of disenfranchised people who came together and started realizing power" - state-wide organization

Language Access Intracommunity Civic education and participation

"I just would love to see a much better turnout of our Hispanic voters. And I don't know what we can do to make that happen. They move a lot so it's hard to keep in touch with them. Luckily, they're moving away from the downtown, into homes." - city clerk

Intracommunity Election administration

² [Census Quick Facts](#)

³ [Census Quick Facts](#)

⁴ [Census Quick Facts](#)

Lowell

110,997

Population⁵

89.5%

of total population growth
in the city was attributable
to immigrants⁶

69

Number of languages
spoken in the schools⁷

Following a federal voting rights suit filed by a coalition of Latinx and Asian-American voters, Lowell has undergone significant changes to address issues related to representation and governance. A new system, referred to as a district and at-large “hybrid” system, will be in place for the election of members of the Lowell City Council and School Committee, replacing the “at-large” elections. Despite being an immigrant city, Lowell is struggling with an influx of new communities and has a reputation for “not often being very welcoming to immigrants.”

Key community organizations



What we heard

“Many of my students don’t have access to technology. My kids didn’t have internet, 71% are on FARMS and are food insecure, 20-40% of my kids had covid”
– educator

Infrastructure COVID-19

“Battles related to a lawsuit that had to do with districts vs. at large elections, racial impact of that, became part of a different campaign and settlement suit. Collateral damage was reducing the number of polling places. Heading in the right direction though.” - state-wide organization

Civic education Election administration

⁵ [Census Quick Facts](#)

⁶ [New Americans in Lowell](#)

⁷ [Lowell Public Schools 2020-2025 Strategic Plan](#)

Springfield

153,606

Population⁸

39.1%

Homes with a language other than English⁹

10%

Voter turnout in the November 2021 election¹⁰

Springfield was one of the first Gateway Cities to switch from at-large to ward-based city council elections in 2009. This led to a city council that better reflects the demographics of the city. But turnout remains low and several people used words like ‘apathy’ and ‘worn out’ to describe the general feeling of community organizers in the city. Others mentioned feeling “neglected by the geographic bias of Boston.” Without an east-west rail line, the only public transportation in and out is by bus.

Key community organizations



What we heard

“We are the other Ferguson — we have one of the worst police departments in the country.” – former elected official

Intracommunity Infrastructure

“We were the only [...] as of 2019, the only majority of color district in MA that didn’t have a person of color representing it. But no one in Boston cared, or in the party.” – former elected official

Civic education and participation Intracommunity

“If you drive through Springfield, you’ll know exactly who lives where without anybody telling you just by driving down the main roads.” – community leader

Civic education and participation Intracommunity Infrastructure

“You’ve got North Hampton trying to suck political cookies out of Springfield” – community leader

Civic education and participation Intracommunity

⁸ [Census Quick Facts](#)

⁹ [Census Quick Facts](#)

¹⁰ [Springfield election results](#)

Worcester



With 20,000 new people in Worcester as of the 2020 census, the “heart of Massachusetts” will likely need to add 10 precincts and “rethink our election operations” with little to no additional funding. Despite the challenges, the city clerk is well-known and runs a tech-savvy, community-centered operation, and was proud of the office’s ability to mail out ballots at a faster rate than Boston. In 2021, the city reached a settlement in a lawsuit brought by a coalition of Black and Latino residents who alleged that the city’s system of electing school committee members dilutes the voting power of people of color and violates federal voting laws with “only one or two people of color on there throughout the history of our city.”

Key community organizations



What we heard

“The city manager that we have now has been extremely proactive and creative and effective in launching this renaissance. It’s been a lot of new businesses. And the jewel in his crown is Polar Park...there’s the other side of that, which is the gentrification, which is happening. So it kind of depends on you...we’re a refugee settlement city.” - community leader

Intracommunity Infrastructure

“But in this city, it’s like, oh, the west side always votes, you know, which is like the more affluent home owning people, and they kind of end up running the show.” - community leader

Civic education and participation

¹¹ [Census Quick Facts](#)

¹² [Census Quick Facts](#)

¹³ [Worcester election results](#)

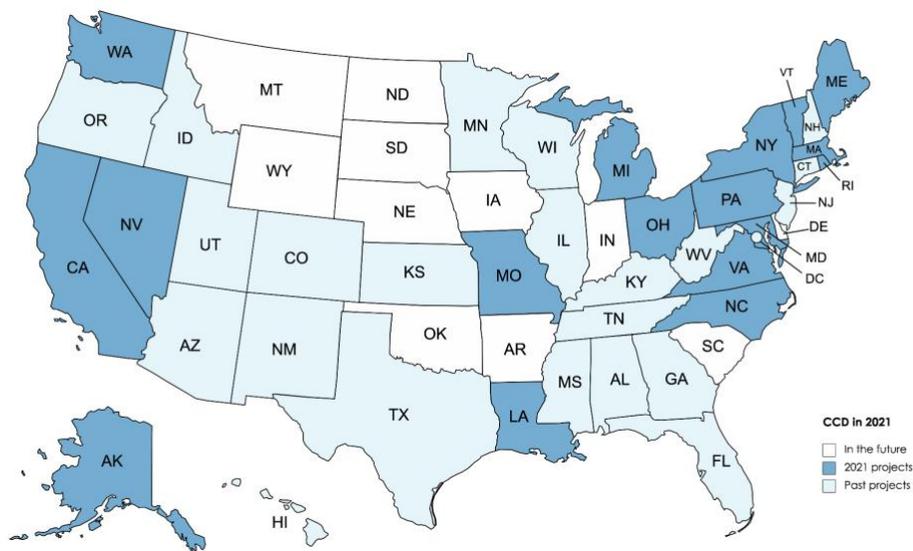
About CCD and the project team

The Center for Civic Design has deep experience in government information, and specific expertise in voter information and interactions. Our work combines usability, accessibility, and plain language to ensure that voters and election workers can understand and use voting systems and other election materials.

CCD has produced several relevant bodies of research on best practices in communicating with voters.

- *Field Guides to Ensuring Voter Intent* – pocket booklets with design and writing guidelines for election materials
- *How Voters Get Information: Best Practices Manual for Official Voter Information Guides* – research with the Future of California Elections
- *Best practices for ranked choice voting* - created with the RCV Resource Center

In working with election offices across the country on the design and usability of their materials from ballots to voter guides, we focus on local needs. Instead of applying a “one election fits all” approach, we use community-focused research, plain language, and accessible design principles to improve voting and election administration at the local level.



The team for this exploratory project

Tasmin Swanson joined CCD after running voter education and engagement programming at Baltimore Votes during the 2020 election. Projects included running Adopt-a-Vote Center, vote-by-mail 1010 webinars, and managing operations for Party at the Mailbox (in partnership with Black Girls Vote). She is a returned peace corps volunteer and former fundraiser for regional theaters.

Asher Kolieboi transitioned to research and design from a long career as a campus and community organizer. Using skills garnered in electoral and community campaigns, Asher's strengths lay in his ability to work with diverse groups, including community organizations and election officials, and translate community needs into high-impact design. Asher's passion sits at the intersections of human-centered design and advocacy.

Fernando Sánchez worked in language access on the university and community level before joining CCD. He designed and taught courses on translation and contributed to research institutes in the University of California system. He holds a PhD from the University of California San Diego. His research interests lie at the intersection of design, language, and community.