

Central Counting Station Plan

1. Purpose

A Central Counting Station (CCS) must be established per Texas Election Code Section 127. The Central Counting Station is a place on election day where all early voting ballots are counted. On election night where ballots are counted, vote totals are accumulated, precinct returns are completed and the unofficial elections results are generated.

2. Location

The Houston County Central Counting Station will be located at:

Houston County Ageing Services, 112 B East Houston Avenue, Crockett, TX 75835.

The Central Counting Station will convene on Election Day, at 9:30 a.m. for the tabulation of Absentee Ballot by Mail and Early Voting in Person ballots, then will reconvene at 5:30 p.m. for Election Day ballots.

3. General Conduct Rules

Please remember the following guidelines:

- Maintain the highest standards of honesty, integrity, fairness, and confidentiality.
- Uphold all federal, state, and local laws related to elections.
- The use of wireless communication devices is prohibited within CCS. This includes cell phones, digital phones, cameras, and sound recorders.
- Any type of disturbance will be addressed by the CCS Presiding Judge(s) or CCS Manager and may lead to the person being removed from the CCS location.

4. Central Counting Station Personnel

Mandatory appointment positions:

- CCS Manager (Sec. 127.002): The manager is in charge of the overall administration of the CCS and the general supervision of personnel. The manager must have knowledge and experience in the conduct of elections using the electronic voting system. In Houston County, the Manager is the Elections Administrator.
- Tabulation Supervisor (Sec. 127.003): The Tabulation Supervisor is in charge of the operation of tabulating equipment and must be trained in the operation of the automatic tabulating equipment. The Tabulation Supervisor is appointed by the authority procuring the electronic voting system. In Houston County, the Tabulation Supervisor is the Elections Equipment Support Technician.
- CCS Presiding Judge and/or Alternate Judge (Sec. 127.005): The Presiding Judge and Alternate Judge is responsible for maintaining order and has the same authority as a precinct presiding judge. They are responsible for determining voter intent for ballots and signing off on precinct returns and reconciliation forms. The presiding judge and alternate judge are appointed, in the same manner as an election presiding judge.

Optional appointment positions:

- CCS Clerks (Sec. 127.006): Clerks may be appointed by the CCS Manager or the Presiding Judge. The Manager may appoint clerks to assist in duplicating ballots. The Presiding Judge may appoint clerks to assist in logging entries in the chain of custody as polling place precinct judges bring in voted ballots and resolve voter intent issues.

All appointed CCS personnel must take an oath of office and wear a name tag as prescribed by the Texas Secretary of State.

5. Security Procedures

A licensed peace officer must be present at the central counting station whenever it convenes to ensure the security of ballot boxes containing voted ballots. This officer must be present throughout tabulation on election day and also after election day to count provisional ballots and late-arriving mail ballots.

6. Poll Watchers

Poll watcher(s) appointed to serve at the CCS must present a valid certificate of appointment and a certificate of completion of the Secretary of State's Poll Watcher training to the CCS Presiding Judge when they report. They are allowed to serve at CCS during the hours of their choosing, but they cannot leave during voting hours on election day without the CCS Presiding Judge's permission if the counting of ballots has begun. If a poll watcher observes an irregularity or violation of law, they may bring it to the attention of an election officer, but once the CCS Presiding Judge has been notified, the issue can only be discussed with that person. While a poll watcher is entitled to observe any activity conducted at the location the watcher is serving, poll watcher(s) should not be disruptive to the counting or tabulation process.

All activities of a poll watcher(s) shall follow the current Poll Watchers Guide issued by the Secretary of State.

7. Procedures for Convening the Central Counting Station

This section will address the timeframes for when the central counting station may convene under section 87.0241 of the Texas Election Code. For counties with a population of less than 100,000, the earliest time for convening is when the polls open on Election Day.

8. Testing Procedures

1st Test – notice of the Public L&A Test and 1st Tabulation Test will be posted on the entity's website and published in the newspaper for at least 48 hours before the test begins.

2nd Tabulation Test – must be performed immediately before the counting of ballots begins on the equipment.

3rd Tabulation Test – must be performed immediately after the counting of ballots is completed on the equipment.

9. Intake Procedures

- Early Voting in Person (EV): The Early Voting Clerk and Law Enforcement will transport the ballots cast during Early Voting in Person to the CCS when a box becomes full or at the end of Early Voting, where they will be placed under lock and key until Election Day for counting.
- Absentee Ballot by Mail (ABBM): The mail-in ballots will be taken from the Elections Administration Office to the Early Voting Ballot Board (EVBB) for processing at each of the scheduled EVBB meetings. After the mailed ballots are processed, they will be put back into the ballot box, sealed, and transported to the CCS by the Early Voting Clerk and Law Enforcement. They will then be secured and kept under lock and key until Election Day for counting.
- Election Day (ED): The ballots cast on Election Day will be transported from each precinct to the CCS station by the Presiding Judge and Alternate Judge. They will then surrender the ballot box to the CCS Clerk, who will verify the seal number and open the ballot box to ensure that the voted ballots, along with the Register of Official Ballots/Ballot and Seal Certificate, are inside. If everything is in order, then a signed receipt for materials delivered will be given to one of the delivery officers.

10. Tabulation Procedures

After completing the intake process, the CCS Manager is responsible for preparing the ballots for automatic counting. They will examine the ballots for irregular markings and ensure that the ballots are ready for automatic counting. Once approved, the ballots will be handed over to the tabulation supervisor or their representative for counting.

11. Duplication Procedures

Certain ballots counted with automatic tabulating equipment may have to be duplicated if the ballot is damaged or cannot be read with the equipment. (Texas Election Code Sec 127.125 & 127.126)

When a ballot is duplicated, the duplicate ballot must clearly be labeled "Duplicate", and the serial number of the original ballot must be placed on the duplicate ballot at the bottom of the page, along with the initials of the CCS staff performing this action. The duplication ballot will be counted using the tabulation equipment, and then the two ballots will be placed together and retained.

12. Adjudication Procedures / Resolving Voter Intent

At the direction of the Presiding Judge(s), CCS staff will resolve any voter intent questions on the ballots as they are duplicated or manually counted, as applicable

- The Presiding Judge(s) and Resolution Board (Early Voting Ballot Board) will decide the voter's intent prior to the duplication of a ballot
- The Presiding Judge(s) and CCS staff will create the duplicate ballot based on the deciphered voter intent.

13. Reconciliation

The process for comparing the number of voters listed as having voted and the number of ballots cast:

- Early Voting In-Person: CCS Presiding Judge(s) should compare the total of voters that signed in on the combination form or pollbook, to the total number of votes cast.
- Early Voting by Mail: compare the number of ballots entered on the “Ballot Transmittal Form” from the EVBB to the number of ballots counted.
- Election Day: compare the total of voters that signed in on the combination form or pollbook, to the total number of votes cast. To provide the total unofficial results for the election after the CCS has completed the tabulation for election day, CCS Presiding Judge(s) should compare the total number of voters from early voting in-person, early voting by mail, and election day.
- CCS reconvenes after election day to count late-arriving mail ballots, corrective action ballots, and provisional ballots. New unofficial result totals will be released that includes all voted ballots from election day and any late-arriving ballot cast.
- Any discrepancies should be investigated and resolved before the canvassing for the election and the release of final results.

14. Generating Results

Early Voting and Ballot by Mail results will be released at 7 p.m. on election day. After the polls close, the unofficial election results will be released as soon as they are available. Once all the votes have been tallied, the CCS Presiding Judge(s) will be responsible for preparing the precinct election returns. The judge(s) will then sign the precinct returns to certify their accuracy. (Texas Election Code Sec 68.034(b), 65.014, .015 & .016)

15. Reporting Results to the SOS

In certain elections, including primary elections, the general election for state and county officers, and special elections ordered by the governor, the SOS is required to tabulate the unofficial results statewide. (Texas Election Code Ch. 68) For these elections, the information is reported to the SOS through their online portal program.

16. Convening of Ballot Board for Provisional, Late-Arriving Mail, and Corrective Action Mail Ballots

The CCS will generally meet after election day to count provisional ballots that have been reviewed by the voter registrar and accepted for counting by the Early Voting Ballot Board, as well as any late-arriving or corrective action mail ballots. These ballots will be secured and transported to the CCS for counting using the tabulation machine. Once the ballot(s) have been counted, the results will be prepared in the usual manner, and the CCS Manager will then prepare a certification and attach it to the returns. These new unofficial election results will supersede any previous reports printed by the CCS.

17. Delivery of Materials to the General Custodian of Election Records

After the completion of the counting of ballots on election day and, if necessary, after the election, all voted ballots, electronic media, election records, and election equipment will be retained by this office, which is the general custodian of election records, until the end of the appropriate retention period.

18. Publication

The central counting station plan will be made available to the public on request no later than 5 p.m. of the fifth day before election day and will also be made available on the county’s election website.