Why This Review Is Important

The STAR Call Center (STAR) answers separate phone lines for the Treasurer, Assessor, Recorder and Elections, and is often the first point of contact for Maricopa County residents and voters. STAR provides callers with information and coordinates additional follow up when necessary. During an election cycle, STAR expands its workforce by hiring temporary call agents to handle the high volume of calls from Maricopa County voters.

We reviewed STAR's processes to assess its preparations for Arizona's 2020 primary and general elections. Our work included reviewing election support activities for (1) recruiting and training temporary call agents, and (2) call management and reporting.

We provided an interim update memo of our progress on July 22, 2020, and another on October 26, 2020, just prior to the primary and general elections. This report shares key observations and recommended improvements for future elections.

Key Findings

- Call agent recruitment and training fell below target levels, partly due to challenges with using a new recruitment model and staffing agency limitations.

- Tracking and following up on call issues was a highly manual process, resulting in some callers not receiving a call back to address their issues.

All findings requiring corrective action were addressed through agreed-upon management action plans.

What We Reviewed

Following is a summary of work performed and findings. Corresponding recommendations and responses start on page 3. The responses were approved by Brent Vaughn, STAR Director, on May 17, 2021. More detailed observations and recommendations were communicated to management throughout the review process.

Recruiting & Training

Background – Prior to the 2020 election cycle, STAR was responsible for recruiting, hiring, training, and supervising all temporary call agents, typically through contracted staffing agencies. For the 2020 election cycle, STAR partnered with the Elections Department (Elections) to directly recruit temporary employees as call agents in addition to using staffing agencies.

Observations – Leading up to each election, STAR encountered recruiting issues early on. The number of temporary call agents recruited fell below the desired recruiting targets established in the Elections Plan until (1) STAR deployed more focused efforts 2-3 weeks before the elections, and (2) STAR hired additional call agents from staffing agencies. As a result, STAR had less time to ensure call agents were adequately trained and prepared.

Similar challenges are expected in future elections unless corrective actions are taken. Below are the obstacles observed and our recommendations.

- Interagency Recruiting Coordination – We noted unclear ownership and communication of recruiting responsibilities, including a lack of coordination between STAR and Elections. Under the new recruiting model, it took several weeks to place and start a candidate, resulting in many candidates leaving for other opportunities during the process (**Recommendation 1**).

- Election Planning & Resources – STAR had no written plan for the 2020 election cycle describing its election support services, recruiting and training strategies, key metrics, timelines, resource needs, and other information to help ensure successful preparations (**Recommendation 2**).

- Background Checks – STAR reported that background checks for temporary call agents were overly restrictive for the nature of the short-term assignments. In addition, the background checks delayed the hiring and onboarding process, leaving less time to ensure call agents were adequately trained and prepared (**Recommendation 3**).

- Staffing Agencies – STAR had access to a vendor on County contract that acts as a staffing broker and draws from other temporary staffing agencies in Arizona. Leading up to the elections, there was a labor shortage and STAR did not engage the vendor early enough to overcome time constraints. After working with the vendor to address immediate staffing needs, STAR received approval to augment their needs through additional providers (**Recommendation 4**).

Call Management & Reporting

Background – The automated phone messaging system provided callers various options and pre-recorded messages to assist them with their questions. The caller has an option to speak with a live agent at any point for additional assistance.

Observations – We reviewed the options and messages that callers receive through the automated phone system and found them to be accurate and appropriately updated in the weeks leading up to each election.

Tracking and following up on call issues was a highly manual process, resulting in some callers not receiving a call back to address their issues. This not only reflected poorly on the County but repeat callers tied up lines that could be used to assist other callers. We noted no formal mechanism in place to track and report call nature, escalations, and trending voter questions/issues (e.g., ballot status). Opportunities may exist to track and flag issues for follow up within the Voter Registration Access System (**Recommendation 5**).

Additional Information

This review was approved by the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors and was performed as a consulting engagement as defined by the International Standards for the Professional Practice of Internal Auditing, set forth by the Institute of Internal Auditors. This report is intended primarily for the County Board of Supervisors and other County stakeholders. However, this report is a public record and its distribution is not limited. If you have any questions about this report, please contact Mike McGee, County Auditor, at 602-506-1585.

Recommendations and Responses

Recommendations to STAR	Responses
1 Collaborate with both the County's Innovation Studio and Elections Department to explore alternate solutions that will increase recruiting effectiveness and efficiency.	Concur – in progress Will coordinate and collaborate with County's Innovation Studio, Elections Dept, and Human Resources to explore alternate recruiting solutions to ensure adequate staffing. Target Date: 03/01/2022
2 In coordination with the Elections Department, develop a written STAR Election Plan for each future election cycle that addresses recruiting and training strategies, key metrics, timelines, resource needs, and other information to help ensure preparations are successful.	Concur – in progress Will collaborate with the Elections Department to develop a written plan for future elections that addresses recruiting and training strategies, key metrics, timelines, resource requirements, responsibilities, and other information to ensure success of STAR election support. Target Date: 03/01/2022
3 Coordinate with County HR to determine the appropriate background check criteria for temporary positions in future elections. Review the process to identify any opportunities for further efficiencies.	Concur – in progress Will partner with County HR to review background check criteria for temporary employees to determine what, if any, opportunities exist for efficiency gains, and implement those changes. Target Date: 03/01/2022

Recommendations to STAR (cont.)	Responses
4 Engage the staffing agency vendor earlier in the election cycle with a staffing plan. If it's determined that the vendor can't meet STAR's staffing needs, then coordinate with the Office of Procurement Services to identify potential alternatives.	Concur – in progress As one of the expected solutions to Recommendation #1, engage with staffing agency vendor early in the election cycle with a staffing plan. If determined that the vendor can't meet STAR's staffing needs, coordinate with the Office of Procurement Services to identify and secure alternative agencies. Target Date: 03/01/2022
5 Collaborate with Recorder's Office and Elections to explore access and training to certain components of the Voter Registration Access System to promote effective voter issue tracking and follow up.	Concur – in progress Partner with Recorder's Office and Elections Dept. to explore opportunities to access VRAS in order to provide feedback loop to these offices and provide meaningful and actionable tracking of voter issues. Target Date: 03/01/2022