

Wisconsin Elections Commission

Offers Grants to Help Improve Cyber Security

The Wisconsin Elections Commission is pleased to announce a \$1.1 million grant program to help municipalities and counties upgrade office computer security for the 2020 elections. On September 24, 2019, the WEC approved the Election Security Grant program and an expedited timeline for applications and distribution of funds.

“WEC’s goal is to make sure that every clerk has an up-to-date, secure computer and access to professional IT support,” said WEC Administrator Meagan Wolfe. “To do that, we will be offering grants of up to \$1,200 for each municipality and county, using part of the federal election security grants Wisconsin received.”

“These grants present an opportunity to meet the election security needs identified in small communities with limited resources,” Wolfe continued. “We developed the program in consultation with the professional organizations that represent local election officials including the Wisconsin Towns Association, the Wisconsin Municipal Clerks Association, and the Wisconsin County Clerks Association, as well as our clerk advisory committees.”

Municipal and county clerks will receive formal grant announcement documents by September 27. These documents include a Memorandum of Understanding, which must be signed and returned to WEC by November 15, 2019 by all jurisdictions wishing to participate in the grant program.

WEC plans to process the requests and issue checks for the first round of grants to jurisdictions that need to meet baseline standards by November 29, 2019. The Commission is also seeking input from counties and municipalities that already meet baseline standards through a survey about additional cyber security needs that could be addressed by a future grant program.

The Commission also directed that grant applications from jurisdictions in the 7th Congressional District will be considered first due to the upcoming special primary and election on December 30 and January 27 to fill the vacant seat in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Wolfe noted that clerks who use the WisVote system will be required to have a computer that meets baseline standards. The grant program is designed to help clerks meet those baseline standards. The Commission has authorized staff to deny WisVote access to devices that do not meet baseline standards by January 28, 2019.

Tier 1 Grant Details

The first phase of the program (formally known as Tier 1) is designed to help municipalities and counties that agree to meet certain baseline standards. They are:

- 1) Possess compliant (up-to-date) computer hardware and software owned by the jurisdiction
- 2) Possess either in-house or contracted IT support

- 3) Complete WEC Election Security Training Requirements
- 4) Complete an Elections Security Contingency Plan.

ES Grant funds will be provided to municipalities and counties in equal amounts up to a maximum of \$1,200, based on the total number of requests received. The anticipated total amount available is up to \$1.1 million. Jurisdictions applying for grant funds will indicate what baseline or advance security items they need. A set amount will then be awarded for each baseline need as follows:

- 1) Jurisdictions indicating the need for a compliant device will be awarded \$600
- 2) Jurisdictions indicating the need to upgrade to Windows 10 will be awarded \$200
- 3) Jurisdictions indicating the need for IT support or managed support will be awarded \$400
- 4) Jurisdictions indicating the need to attend WEC security training will be awarded \$100
- 5) Jurisdictions indicating the need for other security upgrades will be awarded a set amount determined based on allocation of remaining funds after baseline needs have been met.

For example, if clerks do not have a computer owned by their jurisdiction (because they are using their own computer or a public library computer) they can receive \$600 to purchase a computer and \$400 to purchase three years of professional IT support. They can also receive \$100 to cover the cost of attending election security training. This would also apply to a clerk using an older computer that cannot be upgraded to Windows 10 who needs a new computer and IT support.

Clerks will be able to use their grant funds to choose from different types of computers (laptop and desktop) available at a discount through a State of Wisconsin purchasing contract. The Tier 1 grant program will also provide clerks with detailed step-by-step guides to each of the requirements and recommendations listed above. This will include lists of recommended IT support companies. Specifically, clerks will receive instructions explaining:

- how to purchase a managed hardware device (multiple options)
- how to obtain various free DHS cybersecurity services
- how to sign up for free anti-DDOS services
- how to update an operating system
- how to complete baseline security training
- how to prepare a contingency plan (samples provided)
- how to implement multi-factor authentication for e-mail.

Jurisdictions receiving grant funds must have an up-to-date computer and professional IT support, attend training, and complete a contingency plan by January 28, 2020. WEC may grant extensions to jurisdictions, but the final deadline to expend the grant funds is September 30, 2020.

Needs Survey for Possible Future Grants

Municipalities and counties that have already met the baseline requirements will be asked to complete a survey indicating their additional security needs for future consideration by the Commission. The Commission will discuss the survey results at its December 2, 2019, meeting.