

Gail Fenumiai, Alaska director of elections



After 11 years overseeing elections in the largest state in the union, Gail Fenumiai has decided to retire. Her tenure as elections director began in 2008 but she started working in the state elections office before that. After leaving the position in 2015, she returned in 2019.

Since returning, Fenumiai oversaw elections during the COVID-19 pandemic and the transformation of the state's voting system to involve a top-four open primary and ranked-choice voting.

What are you most proud of during your tenure as director of elections for the State of Alaska (besides all the fabulous "I Voted" sticker designs of course, because that's a given! 😊)?

I am proud of the staff at the division. They are tough and give it their all to ensure that every Alaskan has the opportunity to vote. I think 2022 was a year of great accomplishments for the division. The state's first all by mail election (special primary election held in a very short time frame) – also the state's first top 4/pick 1 primary election, completion of redistricting prior to the August primary, the first ranked choice voting statewide general election in November (although voters did get to experience it in one race in August for the special general election to fill a congressional vacancy).

What was the most difficult challenge you faced and what did you learn from it?

I look at 2022, it was an action-packed year with what is listed above. There was never a "down" moment. It was important to always stay focused and have consistent communication with staff. Address issues head on and work collaboratively with staff to resolve them.

Between when you left in 2015 and came back in 2019, the election world completely shifted with the designation of elections as critical infrastructure. What was it like coming back to a field that had changed so much but whose core mission was the same?

Addressing the constant mis and dis-information. It just seemed to never end. I was always open and transparent, but that didn't matter to some. People don't always want to hear the truth, they just want to be right.

You helped shepherd Alaska through a massive ballot-measure approved election reform. Other states (Michigan and Nevada) are about to tackle the same thing. What advice do you have for them based on your experiences as they move through the process?

Start your voter education early. You can never do enough. Be open and transparent with all your processes.

What's the most uniquely Alaska elections thing you can think of?

Alaska is over 663,000 square miles with about only 20% accessible by road. That's a huge challenge. You can't just hop in a car and get to polling places on election day. Relying heavily on USPS to get election supplies and equipment to and from precincts.

Elections officials are under more stress than ever before and sometimes that stress comes with outside threats. What advice would you give to someone who is considering a career in elections?

To not take it personally (even though it is hard). Never veer from your state's election laws. Have open communication with your peers (there is strength in numbers and NASED is a great group). Do not hesitate to report incidents.

What's next for you? Besides sleeping in on Election Day?

I'm just taking it slow for a while. Enjoying time at home with my husband and dogs. Love being able to just do anything at any time. Travel to visit our kids and try to keep my airline elite status. 😊