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In Focus This Week

## Election security at your fingertips

*Florida counties use biometrics to enhance security*

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electionline

In 2018, the federal government [authorized \\$380 million](#) in grants for states to improve their election security. Since then, elections officials have been finding a [variety of ways](#) to spend their funding to secure the franchise.

While some states kept the HAVA II funding at the state level, in other states like Florida the money has trickled down to the counties. Two Florida counties — [Brevard](#) and [Collier](#) — are choosing to enhance their elections security through biometrics.

Once the thing of science fiction movies, biometric authentication has moved mainstream with it being used by banks, airport security, hospitals, business for time and attendance tracking and now even elections offices.

So what exactly is biometrics? Biometric authentication is a security process that relies on the unique biological characteristics of an individual, say a fingerprint, to verify that they are who they say they are. Typically, biometric authentication is used to manage access to physical and digital resources such as buildings, rooms and computers.

Brevard and Collier are using biometrics authentication as one step in multi-factor authentication for employees and in Brevard, for seasonal staff as well.

“Multi-factor authentication is considered a best practice by the Center for Internet Security and the National Institute of Technology, and it is a pre-emptive measure to improve our office’s security posture,” explained Kimberly Dale, communications director for the Brevard County Supervisor of Elections Office. “Biometric authentication is intended to act as a second factor to supplement strong password security requirements for our users to log in to their workstations and email and help safeguard data.”

Both counties have contracted with [BIO-Key](#) to provide the biometrics equipment and software. The company has worked internationally in elections, but their work with Brevard and Collier is their first foray into U.S. elections.

“It’s interesting. We’ve done quite a bit internationally on the election front where they’ve been using biometrics for voter security, actually securing a vote cast,” explained Michael W. DePasquale, chairman and CEO of BIO-Key. “They reached out to us because they had received the money and were looking for a very straight forward multi-factor authentication tool.”

DePasquale explained that the system is fairly simple to set up and use, which seemed to appeal to both counties because it didn’t take a lot of extra time from their busy schedules. He noted that the system is in use everywhere from nursery schools for attendance taking to high schools for lunch programs. But it’s the work the company is now doing with elections offices that has him excited.

How it works: Essentially anyone using the system has two-four fingerprints scanned into the system—multiple fingerprints in case you get a cut DePasquale notes—and then those fingerprints are connected to a user name and password. A

small fingerprint scanner is attached to computer through a USB port and then when an employee signs in, they also scan their fingerprint for access.

“We see the opportunity to really make an impact here and to really make a difference and secure the infrastructure for what is one of our most precious benefits as an American,” DePasquale said.

Collier County began using biometric authentication in 2018 with the plan to have it rolled out to staff in all departments by 2020. Trish Robertson, elections communications coordinator for the supervisor of elections office said that set up and implementation time has been minimal and it cost the county under \$10,000 for the equipment and the licensing.

Brevard has used about \$6,000 of its HAVA 2 funds for the system.

“BIO-Key is able to provide a hardware solution, the fingerprint readers, along with a software solution, ID Director for Windows, which integrates with our current IT environment, and the use of biometrics is convenient for our staff to utilize. Ease of use was an important factor in our decision,” Dale in Brevard County explained.

“After a demonstration of the software, the decision was made. Other alternatives examined were Duo, YubiKey, and Microsoft’s Windows Hello for Business, but these did not present themselves as user-friendly as BIO-Key.”

Although the counties will be using biometric authentication with staff and seasonal workers, it won’t be used at the polling place on Election Day.

“We do use e-poll books (EViDs), [but] [w]e do not plan to use the dual-authentication system with our election workers using the EViDs,” Robertson in Collier County explained. “They are required to enter their initials for any of the work they do on the EViDs so every transaction done on the EViD is tracked.”