Just a few days before early voting was scheduled to begin for a local election, a computer virus hit Potter County, Texas. Even though the event occurred outside of the election department, it held the potential to derail the upcoming election. As the county IT team worked to limit attack damage, the election team needed a way to communicate with polling locations, the state voter registration system and the community to conduct the election as scheduled.

Fortunately, months earlier Potter County participated in an Election Security Assessment (ESA) through a program coordinated by the Texas Secretary of State (SoS) Office and the Texas Department of Information Resources (DIR). Administered by CyberDefenses in partnership with AT&T, the assessment proved to be the deciding factor that enabled Election Administrator Melynn Huntley and the rest of the elections staff to move ahead with the election uninterrupted.

“Potter County Elections is the poster child for why every county needs to do an Election Security Assessment. An election was saved because we did the assessment.”

- Melynn Huntley
Potter County Elections Administrator

“Potter County Elections is the poster child for why every county needs to do an ESA,” Huntley explains. Using HAVA funds, the Texas SoS Office offers the assessments as a free service to counties. The assessments give election officials a prioritized list of steps to improve their cybersecurity posture against cyber threats, and the confidential results are not shared with the state.

To learn more contact CyberDefenses at elections@cyberdefenses.com
DEVELOPING A PLAN
The ESA involves an onsite visit from cybersecurity analysts who review the county's end-to-end election process, from the security of the network and computer equipment to Darknet activity and staff knowledge of cybersecurity best practices. Then, a Chief Information Security Officer (CISO) makes recommendations ranked by urgency to address any gaps and improve the overall strength of the election department’s defenses.

“One of the tasks that the election office took very seriously was creating an emergency plan that stated what we would do if a cyber breach occurred," Huntley says. “Using this plan developed as a result of the assessment, we were able to respond and adapt very quickly to prevent the virus from impacting the election.”

SAVING THE ELECTION AND KEEPING THINGS RUNNING SMOOTHLY
Election equipment is never connected to the internet so votes remained unaffected by the cyber attack, but the team needed internet connectivity to communicate with the polling sites and access voter records. Following the contingency actions defined in the emergency plan, the elections team established alternate internet connectivity which enabled them to move forward with the election as scheduled.

“On the first day of early voting, the election opened on time with all voting systems functioning and the integrity of the vote intact. We operated in emergency mode for the full five days with no problems. Voters had no disruptions to service, and all data flowed just as it should," Huntley shares. “Because of the assessment, an election was saved.”

Challenge
Days before an election in Potter County, Texas, computers county-wide were infected by a virus that could have potentially left the Potter County Elections team without the connectivity needed to conduct the election.

Result
The elections team participated in an Election Security Assessment coordinated by the Texas SoS Office and DIR and administered by CyberDefenses in partnership with AT&T. The results prompted the Potter County Elections staff to create an emergency plan that enabled the election happen on schedule.