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The Mailbox Won't Save Us: Exclusive Interview with County Clerk Amelia Powers-Gardner

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Below is the transcription of an interview conducted by **David Cohen**, *Co-Founder and Managing Director of* Techstars, *the global platform for investment and innovation that connects entrepreneurs, investors, and corporations.*

David interviewed **Amelia Powers-Gardner** *on this year's election, her experience deploying the latest technology on the front lines, and more.*

Amelia Powers-Gardner *is county clerk of Utah County in Utah and was sworn into office in January 2019. Amelia is one of Government Technology 2020's Top 25 Doers, Dreamers and Drivers.*

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(view full interview here)

David Cohen: Amelia, let's start by talking about the Utah County election system for managing voting before you got there. I think the headline that announced your rival said something like Power has a way forward to fix the dysfunction in the elections office. So how was it like when you found it?

Amelia Powers-Gardner: The elections office when I came in, was really severely under resourced, and it was like all of their processes had been put together piecemeal. They had gone to vote by mail about a year and a half earlier, and in

that process, they hadn't laid out a workflow they had just kind of added a whole bunch of elements and shoved them together. They processed ballots in two buildings on three floors in six locations, moving ballots back and forth. At the polling locations, they were significantly under resourced, and that caused long lines, and basically a lot of chaos. Also, there was really no way to communicate with voters. They had no social media accounts, no email lists, no active communication with the voters. So dysfunction is probably a pretty good way to describe how it was.

David Cohen: One of the maverick sort of things that I know Utah County happens to be the first in the country to allow people with disabilities to vote remotely, tell me about the original conversation there and how that played out?

Amelia Powers-Gardner: Yeah, we did a pilot for mobile voting and it was for our overseas and military members. After that pilot, we did an audit, the audit came back clean. We surveyed everyone who had used it, those who surveyed loved it. We didn't have negative feedback from those that had actually used the system it was all very positive. And as I looked at that I wanted to look at other demographics that could be served, underserved populations that we could, sort of utilizing this. As we looked at the law, it said that anything used for overseas voters can also be used for the disabled community. It was really a no brainer at that point. This is a demographic of people that are currently being underserved, and that we could really use some sort of a method to help serve them. It was a natural extension.

David Cohen: So I'd like to hear about the results that you had. What were the reactions of the voters who heard this news and used these technologies?

Amelia Powers-Gardner: That's a great question. What's interesting about this is the most positive feedback we have received has been feedback from people who have actually used the system. Those people that were being underserved, they found that sometimes mailing in a ballot is not as simple as putting a stamp on it and putting in the mailbox, and the alternate methods really put a barrier to them voting. Those that have used this system are our biggest advocates, and they give us the most positive feedback.

> **"**Those that have used [mobile voting] are our biggest advocates, and they give us the most positive feedback.

David Cohen: Because we're talking about innovation specific to COVID-19, I also want to ask you about a voter who voted after a kidney transplant, and the oldest voter in America to have ever voted online. Can you tell us that story?

Amelia Powers-Gardner: Yeah, we have two different people that we've served in the last several elections, one of them is a recent kidney transplant, couldn't leave their house, and frankly their wife didn't want to leave the house either because she didn't want to be exposed to anything that she could bring home. And this person didn't have a reliable smartphone, we were able to bring them a tablet that they could then sanitize and they could cast their ballot using that. Because of the kidney transplant, they were in a long term care facility and therefore they didn't get their ballot in the mail. They were still able to cast a vote, utilizing this electronic

system independently. And for them, security is more than just a technological thing, it's also a germ thing and they were able to do that.

The other person, the hundred and six year old, in fact she'll be 107 this year, Maccene Grimmet, she broke her ankle about two years ago and is bedridden. Her caretaker is her daughter, who at 106, Maccene's daughter is in her 80s, and Maccene can't really hold a pencil very steadily but she's very mentally astute, very spry, just can't walk and has a hard time with arthritis holding a pencil. A paper ballot was difficult for her. We were able to give her an iPad, the print's plenty large enough, she was able to read that ballot, cast her vote independently and with dignity. And the greatest thing about Maccene is, she is really passionate about being able to vote in every election. Maccene was born before women in the United States had a right to vote. So being able to cast her ballot every election is incredibly important to her. And we were able to facilitate that using technology.

David Cohen: Wow, those are terrific stories. And with an aging population and more people falling sick, lots of people in hospital beds, unable to access those mail-in ballots. What specific innovations are out there that would be helpful to get them to vote?

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Amelia Powers-Gardner: There's several things that we need to do. There's some that we have, like mobile voting is becoming more accessible. That's absolutely something that we need to consider. If someone's in a hospital bed, they're not at home getting their mail, so we can't mail them a ballot. Also, it might be hard to verify their identity. But if they have a smartphone that has a thumbprint on it, then their phone can verify their identity for us, and we can ensure they're getting the right ballot, and that they're getting it in a timely manner. We also can do more securely germ-wise, right? A piece of paper could have a virus that it could carry on. I think we're hearing that the COVID-19 virus can last possibly days on a piece of paper, but if you have your phone, you can wipe that down with a Clorox wipe. And it's only exposed to you you're not handing it to a nurse who's putting it in an envelope, who's giving it to the mailman, who's giving it to our election workers. It's more sanitary, it's more accessible. If someone is sitting in a hospital bed all day, chances are, they're on Instagram. And if they're on Instagram, they can vote.

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David Cohen: I'm already wiping my phone down three times a day anyway, so this will work great for me. So I read the news like everybody else and I'm curious your perspective on this, you know what's missing in the national discourse when we're talking about finding solutions for safe and secure elections? November... even in the future, what frustrates you when you read the news?

Amelia Powers-Gardner: Right now, one of the most frustrating things for me is we have a political party that's pushing for vote by mail nationwide. I'm not opposed to vote by mail – I'm a vote by mail county. I have about 300,000 registered voters in my county, and we mail every single one of them a ballot, every election. I think vote by mail is great. But what a lot of people don't realize is that we had to put in our order for our envelopes for vote by mail in October. We had to solidify our schedule with the print vendors in December. We had to finalize those schedules in January. We're four months past that right now. And in some cases and envelopes six months past that. You can't just go down to your local print vendor on the corner and say, "Can you run a safe and secure election for me?"

> ❝think vote by mail is great. But what a lot of people don't realize is that we had to put in our order for our envelopes for vote by mail in October, had to solidify our schedule with the print vendors in December, had to finalize those schedules in January. We're four months past that right now. You can't just go down to your local print vendor on the corner and say, "Can you run a safe and secure election for me?"

In my county, I couldn't go down to even Kinkos and say, "I have 300,000 people, and they belong to 300 different precincts and each one of those precincts receives a different ballot and it needs to be safe, and it needs to be secure, and it has to be timely. Can you make that happen?" We simply don't have the bandwidth. You need to have print vendors that have experience and expertise in this. Those print vendors, this is not their small year. This isn't a small municipal election. This is their biggest year, a presidential year. In an off year, a municipal year, they're working one shift and they've got maybe some direct mail campaigns to kind of keep their presses running. And they could probably push that off and ramp up their production.

This year in a presidential year, they're working three shifts. They have all of their assembly lines working, and they've been scheduled for a year. We can't just turn a key and say, can every one of you triple your production because they don't have capacity. They don't have buildings, they don't have machines. And the machines they use are custom order, most of them made in Germany and they're a year or two out. We can't turn a key and make vote by mail happen nationwide like that. What we can do is utilize a smartphone. The vast majority of Americans have a phone that they could use to securely vote, and then those that don't, we could probably pick up the slack with the vote by mail. But a lot of people aren't looking

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David Cohen: It is one of the magical things about online it's bits and bytes and it can be immediately distributed and immediately used.

Amelia Powers-Gardner: Technology is scalable in a way that paper and pencil just isn't.

David Cohen: So before you go Amelia, talk to me about some of the gaps in the voting system that have been exposed by the Coronavirus. What should tech startups be thinking about? I'm an investor, where should I be making more investments to help? How do you best see the public and private sector sort of working together here?

Amelia Powers-Gardner: It's a great question. I see two areas. One of them is polling locations. There's a lot of issues with polling locations. It used to be that we did polling in elementary schools all over the country. In today's society, we can't have 1000 random people walking into an elementary school on a school day. That's just not something we can have. On top of that I talked about it a little earlier, the vast majority of poll workers across the nation are retired, which means that they're in that age demographic. Even if the polling locations are open, and people are willing to show up at the polls, in Clark County in Illinois, they had polling locations where no poll workers showed up, because they didn't want to be exposed to the virus. Polling locations create a lot of logistical issues.

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The second major issue is our voter database. That's everything from the security of our database, Imagine vote by mail, if somebody messed with the addresses on my 300,000 voters, that could cause some serious problems. I would love to see our voter database put in the blockchain, because then if somebody changed those addresses, if they messed with that information, we would have a record of that change. So that's part of the identity issue. The other part is verifying your identity. And a lot of cases right now you have to show up in person and pull out your ID,

the government issued ID. If we can electronically verify someone's identity, then we can allow them to cast a ballot, we can allow them to register to vote without having to physically be there in person, and then managing that database.

David Cohen: As an investor who's invested in a couple thousand tech startups, one of the things that I've learned is that sometimes buzzwords and new technologies are the things that scare people. So blockchain, is what some people hear is unproven. Does that really work? Is that really secure? Do you think that plays a role in the psyche that maybe we ought to at first depend on much more long term established technologies than necessarily trying to use the latest, greatest thing?

> ❝If we can electronically verify someone's identity, then we can allow them to cast a ballot, we can allow them to register to vote without having to physically be there in person.

Amelia Powers-Gardner: Well, I think if those technologies have the ability to give us an immutable record, then yes. I link to blockchain because it gives us an immutable record. If something is changed, we know it. If we can do that with an existing technology I'm not opposed to it. But currently, we have our voter databases, they have all the protections of a server you can think of. We have secure transfer services to our print vendor. But let's say it's secure on our end then we send it to a print vendor, if someone hacks into that print vendor's system and messes with those addresses, just prior to them printing labels and sending out our vote by mail, once again that could wreak havoc. I would love for them to have the ability to check that record against an immutable record.

> ❝The vast majority of people utilize their cell phone to do their banking, fill out the census, send money, purchase items — they put their most private information on their phone. The vast majority of people are excited about mobile voting and they want it, they just don't happen to be the loudest in the crowd.

One thing that I want to point out is, the vast majority of the people, they utilize their cell phone to do their banking, they fill out the census, they send money, they purchase items, they put their most private information on their phone. The vast majority of people are excited about mobile voting and they want it, they just don't happen to be the loudest in the crowd.

David Cohen: That's awesome. Yeah, I totally agree with that.

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