

ELECTION SYSTEMS & SOFTWARE

U.S. and state election printing specialist's Alabama facility leverages the productivity, speed, and accuracy of the Canon ColorStream 6900 web-fed inkjet press to print more than 8 million ballots for the 2024 general election.



Election Systems & Software (ES&S) has been a trusted supplier helping officials run secure elections since 1979. Headquartered in Omaha, Nebraska, and 100% American owned, ES&S is committed to providing accurate, certified, and fully auditable paper-based election solutions. The company's industry-leading output goes well beyond just ballots. Printed materials are tailored to local specifications and developed in collaboration with policymakers and election officials. ES&S is focused on providing integrated products that capture accurate voter intent, reduce waste, improve accessibility, and protect elections from outside threats.

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— Sherry Morris, General Manager for Election Systems & Software

TIME FOR A CHANGE

Sherry Morris joined ES&S in January 2022 as general manager of its Alabama printing facility. There, virtually everything needed to administer elections for the state's 67 counties and 461 municipalities is printed, along with ballots for other states. From the start, Sherry faced both operational challenges and opportunities.

“When I arrived, production was all done on offset printing presses,” Sherry says. “ES&S owned two 40-inch offset presses. One of them was out of commission, and the other was nearing the end of its useful life. On the media front, we had a large inventory of preprinted shells featuring 10–11 different process/Pantone® color bars.”



Sherry Morris, general manager, and James Jones, print production manager, at ES&S.



Technicians at ES&S inspect output from the Canon ColorStream web-fed inkjet press.

The production process she describes relied heavily on manual work. Ballot jobs—usually involving multiple precincts—were provided as PDFs, along with spreadsheets containing the job details, including information such as ballot lengths and quantity breakdown by precinct. The PDF files were manually separated and imposed four-up, with similar quantities ganged together for platemaking and printing. Each job also required time- and labor-intensive postpress steps such as numbering, perforating, offset stacking, and stapling or hand-stitching into pads.

“We did go through my first election here with the offset presses,” Sherry recalls, “and it was painfully obvious we needed to move forward. We needed to grow.”

The company was committed to change. They had already been building a business case for modern technology and to sunset ES&S’s offset presses even before Sherry’s arrival. ES&S was looking for ways to increase productivity in Birmingham

and move more ballot printing to their in-house facility. When hiring Sherry, they knew they had someone who was on board with moving forward and helping facilitate change. ES&S made the decision to remove the offset presses even before purchasing a solution. Everyone involved knew it was time to move to inkjet production.

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REACHING A DECISION

At her previous job, Sherry had worked with Canon, so she didn’t just know the local Canon technicians by reputation, she knew them by name. That relationship was a deciding factor in the purchase decision-making process.

“Initially, I tried to keep my biased opinion out of it,” she says. “We did all the number crunching and thought hard about what we needed the new press to do.”

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Custom integrated workflow built by Canon helps ES&S manage and fulfill Alabama's election print needs.

What it really boiled down to was service and reliability, which Sherry endorsed. “I knew how good and dependable Canon is because I’d worked with them for years,” she explains. “The ColorStream isn’t just a great press; it’s the service that comes along with it.”

It’s that level of confidence in Canon that emboldened ES&S to scrap the offset presses even before purchasing the new system. Sherry recalls, “I was on a call with my team here and someone asked, ‘What’s our Plan B if this doesn’t happen?’ And I responded, ‘There is no Plan B. We’re doing this.’”

ES&S installed a ColorStream 6900 web-fed inkjet press, adding full inline finishing with Tecna equipment. To maximize the productivity and efficiency of the ColorStream, the company also worked with the Canon Professional Services Software Development Group to develop a custom workflow tailored to the company’s unique needs.

This combination proved to be the right production printing solution, offering ES&S the quality, reliability, speed, adaptability, and variable data capabilities the company needed to continue to meet the considerable and cyclical demands of ballot production.

MAKING THE TRANSITION

One key factor in creating a high-performance experience with the ColorStream platform is the integrated workflow custom built for ES&S by the Canon Professional Services Software Development team. Sherry shares just what a difference it has made:

“A ballot quantity run list [BQRL] detailing every printing and finishing specification is an essential part of a



Print Production Team at ES&S in their Alabama facility with the Canon ColorStream web-fed inkjet press.

print job at ES&S. The county may have 18 different ballot styles, with different quantities needed for all those styles. What color ink? One-sided or two? Numbered or not? Maybe we need a perforation at one-and-a-half-inch intervals along a 17-inch-long ballot. And it has to be offset stacked and stapled in pads of 50.”

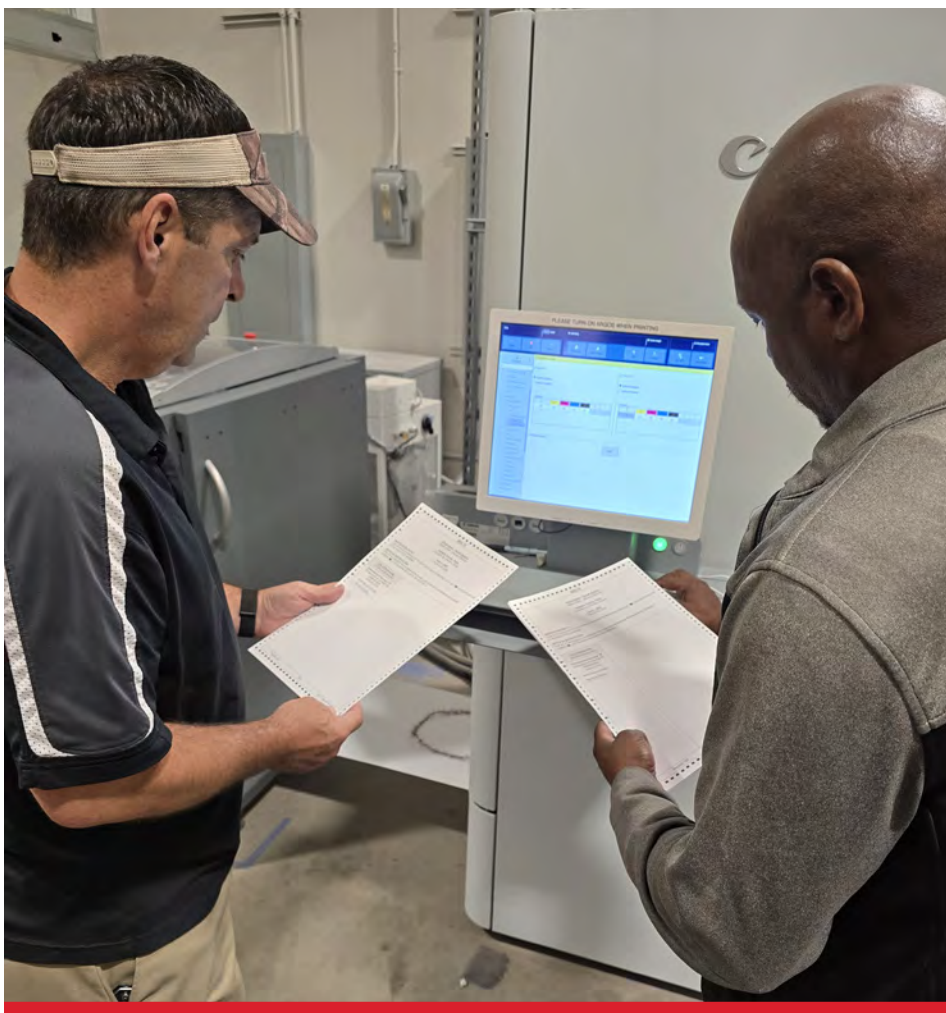
The Canon Professional Services Team helped ES&S establish an efficient approach, developing a custom workflow that was accessible from any workstation to automatically manage those details and help ES&S staff focus on other tasks rather than being tied to computers—or paper and pencil. Ballot configuration and print instructions are managed in Microsoft Excel, allowing flexibility and the addition of new rules over time. A custom graphical user interface supports BQRL processing and allows operators to submit print jobs for just-in-time (JIT) printing. And users can preview a generated ballot PDF before sending it to print.

In addition, ballot numbering can be added digitally as needed, on demand, in any color, with no hardware pre-setup required. Color bars also can be added dynamically—as many as needed, in any color—while Canon technology helps ensure color consistency. That means ES&S now has a white paper workflow and no longer needs to keep preprinted shells on hand.

The combination of Canon production inkjet technology and cutting-edge workflow automation is so efficient and seamless that Sherry describes the process this way: “We drop the specs into a spreadsheet, then put that and a ballot PDF into a folder, and the ColorStream does all its magic. Add inline postpress processing, and we have eliminated at least three days and

“THE TECHNOLOGY IS AWESOME. EVERYBODY’S SAYING, ‘I WANT TO LEARN HOW TO RUN THIS.’”

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Technicians at ES&S manage and fulfill ballot printing jobs with the Canon ColorStream web-fed inkjet press.

a lot of manual touchpoints off one run. It's amazing and means we're able to do more here in the Birmingham facility."

THE RESULTS ARE IN

After the company's first full election cycle with the ColorStream 6900—including a closely watched general presidential election—the benefits of the platform became even more clear to the ES&S team.

"Helping enable productivity through remarkable uptime, quick onboarding of applications, and cutting-edge technology is crucial to a printing operation that can't go down during

crunch time," Sherry says. "And as I like to point out, maybe your power bill can be late. But in an election, that's not an option."

Ballots cannot be printed far in advance. When it is finally time to produce tens of thousands, or even millions, the timelines are tightly compressed. Downtime can be catastrophic and very costly.

The Canon ColorStream proved pivotal during the 2024 election. ES&S was hit with an unexpected shipping delay that left them five days behind schedule. Sherry reports

it was "all hands on deck," including her Canon support counterparts, and "they were wonderful." Significantly, Sherry and her entire crew learned by experience that with all the speed, productivity, reliability, and versatility of the ColorStream 6900 they were able to "get caught right back up." She says with satisfaction, "We even got ahead."

FOCUS ON SECURITY

The decision to install the ColorStream 6900 is also helping ES&S to be well positioned for the future. With election security on everyone's mind, Sherry points out ES&S's commitment to innovation and integrity as another critical part of the company's decision to invest in the Canon ColorStream 6900. ES&S is already prepared to offer the next level of security.

The election industry has been under a great deal of scrutiny, with pressure to add security features to ballots. ES&S made the decision to add UV printing capabilities to its ColorStream 6900 at the time of purchase. This allows the company to offer a heightened level of security to ballots printed at the Birmingham facility.

EMBRACING CHANGE

ES&S is acutely aware that the leap from offset to production inkjet was—and is—a big one. Sherry speaks proudly of her team for their enthusiasm about the new state-of-the-art Canon ColorStream press and how they've stepped into their new roles.

"The technology is awesome. Everybody's saying, 'I want to learn how to run this,'" she says. And ES&S's annual employee engagement survey upholds this observation, revealing strong morale, high job satisfaction, and positive responses to the changes at the facility.

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This enthusiasm goes beyond the local team in Birmingham. ES&S executives and others from the corporate headquarters in Omaha, Nebraska, have visited to see their investment in action. Additionally, there is excitement beyond the ES&S team. “You would not believe how many people have come in to see the press—judges, county workers, even the Alabama secretary of state,” Sherry says. “I’m excited to show it to them. It is impressive to see up close and personal.”

Every election reinforces an important tradition valued across our country—a citizen's right to vote. ES&S is unwavering in upholding its responsibility to print the vital materials needed to administer fair and accurate elections, and they've chosen Canon ColorStream to help make that happen. “It's been a great piece of equipment,” Sherry states, “and Canon truly has been a great ally.”



The entire ES&S team has enthusiastically embraced the technology innovations built into the ColorStream 6900.

ABOUT US

Canon recommends forward-thinking strategies to help achieve the highest levels of information management efficiency for your unique business needs. Using superior technology and innovative services, we then design, implement, and track solutions that help improve information flow throughout your organization while considering the environment, helping to result in greater productivity and reduced costs.

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06.10.26/25-3071-14222