

Absentee Voting and Vote by Mail

Introduction

Ballots are cast by mail in every state, however, the management of absentee voting and vote by mail varies throughout the nation, based on state law. There are many similarities between the two since both involve transmitting paper ballots to voters and receiving voted ballots at a central election office by a specified date. Many of the internal procedures for preparation and mailing of ballots, ballot reception, ballot tabulation and security are similar when applied to all ballots cast by mail.

The differences relate to state laws, rules and regulations that control which voters can request a ballot by mail and specific procedures that must be followed to request a ballot by mail. Rules for when ballot requests must be received, when ballots are mailed to voters, and when voted ballots must be returned to the election official – all defer according to state law.

Listed below are the various types of voting by mail:

- Permanent absentee – usually, but not always, reserved for the elderly and/or those voters with disabilities. These voters automatically receive a ballot in the mail for every election. Some state laws provide for periodic review of the “permanent” status, specifically if the voter does not cast a ballot after several elections.
- Absentee (Voter must provide a reason or excuse) - requires voters to certify that they meet certain criteria, i.e. absent from the jurisdiction on Election Day, temporarily ill or disabled, etc. Some states require that the application to request a ballot must be notarized.
- Early Voting/Absentee (Voter does not have to provide a reason or excuse) - based on state law, voters may submit a request to vote by mail. In some states the request is valid for one or more years. In other states, an application must be completed and submitted for each election.
- Vote by Mail – all votes are cast by mail. Currently, Oregon is the only vote by mail state; however, several states allow all-mail ballot voting options for ballot initiatives.

Ballot Preparation and Mailing

One of the first steps in preparing to issue ballots by mail is to determine personnel and facility and supply needs.

Facility Needs:

Adequate secure space for packaging the outgoing ballot envelopes should be reviewed prior to every election, based on the expected quantity of ballots to be processed. Depending upon the number of ballot styles and quantity of ballots, adequate shelving and a security-controlled storage area must be in place.

NOTE: If inserting is performed at a mailing service, extra space may not be as critical.

Space will be required for sorting undeliverable ballots, since they should be reviewed immediately. Space will also be required for processing returned voted ballots:

- Signature Verification
- Challenged Ballots
- Envelopes
- Separating Ballots from Envelopes
- Duplication, if required

Staffing Needs:

If ballot insertion is done in-house, part-time and/or regular employees, working in teams of two, are assigned and managed in a staged work flow area. Various teams should be set up to help control the flow of materials and expedite the overall procedures:

- Control Team
- Labeling Team
- Packet Assembly Team
- Support Team
- Sort Team

NOTE: If outgoing mail ballot preparations are to be done off-site at a mailing house service, election office staff supervision is recommended.

If the election returned ballot processing is done in-house, review state law and regulations to determine if a sworn election worker board must be in place, or whether supervisors can be regular staff, whose only duty is to oversee the process. It is important to plan for peak periods which will require either more personnel, staggered shifts or overtime.

Equipment and Supplies:

Equipment and supply needs must also be evaluated as it relates to space needs. These may include:

- Ability to run data exports/labels for mailing companies
- Software that provides CASS certification (postal barcode)
- Insertion, folding and sealing machines

- Printers
- Postage meter and envelope sealer machine
- Automatic letter openers
- Computers and bar code devices
- Storage shelves
- Mail trays
- File storage boxes
- Tamper-evident tape

Ballot Preparation and Printing

The first step in preparation for printing and distribution of ballots is to develop a timeline detailing each step in the process. Examples of dates to be included on a timeline are:

- Filing deadline
- Close of registration
- Deadline for public review of ballot design and content
- Developing the ballot order and finalizing contract negotiation with the ballot printer
- Date that ballot file is due at the printer
- Delivery date for printed ballots
- Logic and accuracy testing
- Deadline for mailing of military and overseas ballots
- Date for initial mailing of absentee ballots
- Last date that absentee ballots can be mailed
- Last day for receipt of voted absentee ballots

Once the timeline has been developed, staff assignments and deadlines can be incorporated.

Determining the number of ballots to order is often stipulated by state law or state administrative policies and procedures. If not, the ballot order can be developed by use of a spreadsheet containing the number of voters in each precinct multiplied by the percentage of ballots expected to be requested and/or reviewing the prior election turn-out by precinct.. NOTE: It is important to increase the ballot order to provide for extra ballots needed to develop necessary logic and accuracy testing and to provide for provisional, spoiled and/or replacement ballots.

Before meeting with your ballot printer, make decisions regarding the following:

- Quantities and different variations (ballot styles).
- Consider possible weight limitations (printing instructions back-to-back will reduce the amount of paper and overall weight of the mail).
- Consider different colors for different ballot types or districts.
- Review any specific state requirements for ballots, i.e. numbered, detachable stub on each ballot.
- Include required statutory information per ballot type.
- For Primary Elections, remember to analyze the number of non-affiliated voters (consider buffering ballot quantities to accommodate for party changes or parties opening their

Primary).

Prior to every election, election officials should also contact the local post office to review all policies and procedures relating to mailing, tracking and receiving the ballots. If you plan to use an outside mail service, you should also include a review of election office internal policies and procedures and contract requirements with the mail service vendor. Listed below are possible items to review and consider:

- Identify timelines and scheduling (may want to allow for possible delays).
- Identify staffing needs at all stages of the process (on-site supervision may be required).
- Identify staging requirements (work areas for barcoding, tray assembly, zipping/sorting, etc.).
- Consider quality control and security issues. Indicate how ballot transportation security needs are to be met (i.e. from office or vendor to mailing house or from mailing house to Post Office).
- Specify various quality control issues (tracking and audit trails).
- Establish method for addressing/labeling envelopes.
- For inserts that may be needed, check with vendor on insert capability. Examples include:
 - Secrecy envelopes
 - Return envelopes
 - Ballot (one or more)
 - Local Voters' Pamphlet, if applicable
 - Drop site information, if applicable

Remember to review outgoing and return ballot envelopes before placing new orders. New technology and postal policies/procedures can improve the management of packaging outgoing envelopes and receiving voted ballots.

The Post Office can review or help you design outgoing and return envelopes to ensure they meet the necessary postal standards for automated handling. This includes review and assistance with the proper wording and placement of endorsements on your envelopes as they apply to the Post Office. They will also provide a camera-ready copy of the front side of both outgoing and return envelopes for the printer. This will include, for the return envelope, the 11-digit barcode for your return address.

Other examples include:

- Eliminate the use of labels by printing voter names directly onto the outgoing ballot envelope. *NOTE: Print these envelopes in ballot order instead of alphabetically to improve accuracy and efficiency when pulling and inserting ballots into outgoing envelopes.*
- Implement bar code technology for easy updating of voter history when return ballot envelopes are received in the mail.

- Utilize the official election postal indicia on all outgoing and return ballot envelopes. Remember to review any envelope design changes with your local postal authority. It is recommended that you request their written approval on any changes.
- Discuss options for the return mailing address for voted ballots with your local post office. Options include:
 - Your office address and zip plus 4
 - Post Office assigns a special “plus 4” for the elections office only
 - Establish a specific Post Office box for returned ballot envelopes.

Ballot Mailing

IMPORTANT: As soon as printed ballots are delivered, conduct routine logic and accuracy testing on all ballot styles. This logic and accuracy test MUST be completed prior to mailing or issuing any ballots to voters.

It is important to track the number of envelopes printed each day and balance that number to the number of voter records flagged in the voter file that were issued mail ballots on each day. Print a master listing of voter names issued absentee ballots as a part of your audit trail for each election. Each day that envelopes are printed, a master listing of voter names should also be printed and balanced to the number of envelopes printed, inserted, and delivered to the post office every day. This audit trail will also provide the necessary tool for your use in tracking and verifying your printed ballot inventory.

Coordinate delivery of the outgoing ballots with your local post office. They will schedule a time frame that allows for the immediate distribution of ballots.

NOTE: Larger post offices sometimes require delivery to a specific dock area. If delivery is by truck, the Post Office may require the truck to be weighed before the mailing is loaded and again before off-loading the ballots.

TIP: Take the return ballot envelope package (containing the return ballot and all envelopes) to the post office to confirm the return postage amount. Include this information as an insert message to the voter.

Ballot Reception

The most common delivery method of absentee ballots is by mail. Other methods include drop site locations, often including a location at your local election office.

The local election office may wish to consider coordinating a time with the Post Office to pick up the mail each morning. Even if the return address is the election office, you can arrange with the Post Office to pick up the voted/returned ballots each day. This will allow for earlier ballot

processing. If ballots are returned to a P.O. Box number, the election office should consider establishing a written procedure for collecting these ballot envelopes. *NOTE: Remember to coordinate with the Post Office for the latest pick-up time for last minute returns on Election Night.*

If you plan to use drop site locations, be sure to refer to State Law and state administrative policies and procedures. You will want to determine drop site locations based on population, geographic areas, security and available funding. Consider using city and/or county facilities, public assistance offices, senior and community centers, secure locations in areas with significant minority or traditionally disenfranchised communities as drop off locations when applicable.

When determining locations, be sure to consider where the ballot box will be placed. Items to consider include:

- security
- voter convenience
- access for the physically disabled
- parking

Remember that the ballot boxes must be locked and secure at all times. They should be located in an area that can be viewed and monitored by authorized personnel.

If you plan to use outdoor mailboxes for drive-by or walking traffic, the ballot drop site mailboxes should be accessible only by a key that is in the possession of two authorized election staff members. A predetermined collection schedule should be established. A team of two election staff should transfer the voted ballots to a locked or sealed ballot box, bag or pouch and deliver same to the election office.

Be sure to communicate the location and hours of operation for all drop sites in your jurisdiction. On Election Day, the drop site locations must be monitored throughout the day until the close of the polls or deadline for ballot receipt.

If state law allows the voter to drop off voted absentee ballots at early voting locations and/or the polling places on Election Day, be sure to include instructions and procedures for poll workers to use in returning these voted ballot envelopes to the central election office.

There must be an audit trail throughout the ballot reception process. Consider maintaining logs for processing the ballots through different steps. Maintain all statistical information for each precinct. This may include:

- number of ballots issued
- number of ballots received
- number of ballots counted
- name, team number or person
- date and time processed
- number of challenged ballots

- number of write-ins and duplicated ballots
- number of envelopes that do not contain a ballot
- number of envelopes containing more than one ballot
- number of provisional ballots counted and not counted

The audit trail begins when the first ballot envelopes are returned from voters. On a daily basis, staff at the elections office counts and logs the number of:

- ballots returned by the Post Office
- ballots received over the counter
- ballots received from drop sites, if applicable
- ballots forwarded to other counties
- ballots returned undeliverable

Initial Envelope Sort:

The ballot envelopes are then sorted into categories. Examples include:

- Signature and address match
- Challenged Ballots
 - No signature on ballot envelope
 - Address or name does not match voter record
 - Ballot has markings that could identify the voter
 - Signature does not match signature on file

Based on State law, jurisdictions establish internal procedures for managing returned ballot envelopes with no signatures. These options may include automatically re-mailing (if time permits) the unsigned and unopened envelope back to the voter in a separate outgoing envelope. Often the election staff is required to notify the voter that the ballot cannot be processed unless the envelope is signed by the close of polls on Election Day. The voter can be provided several options, including:

- Request a replacement ballot be mailed (if time permits)
- Sign the return identification ballot envelope at the elections office
- Request that the original unsigned envelope be re-mailed to the voter for a signature (if time permits)

If signature verification is required by State law, it is important to provide your staff with signature verification training. Implement a three-step process for reviewing all rejected signatures – first check is done by part time and/or regular staff; second check is done by more experienced staff; and the third check is conducted by the canvass board. Consider utilizing the following criteria as an example when comparing to the signature on file:

- Capital letters match

- Letters tail off alike
- Letter spacing is the same
- Space between signature and the line is the same
- Beginning and ending of signature and the slant are consistent
- Unique letters match
- Overall appearances match

NOTE: If it is determined that the signature does not match the voter registration card or digitized signature, notify the voter and take other action that is required by your state law, policy and/or regulations.

NOTE: Review State law and/or regulations regarding signatures of voters who are, physically or otherwise, unable to sign their name.

Data Entry of Returned Ballot Envelopes:

For all ballots that fall into the category of “signature and address match”, the envelope is recorded as “returned” and data entry is completed. The number of envelopes in this category is recorded on a data entry log on a daily basis. This number should balance to the number of envelopes stored and flagged as “ready to open and process”.

SAMPLE FORM

Ballots Returned - Summary of Data Entry
Election: _____

Date	# Data Entered	Accumulative Total Entered

For purposes of balancing ballots received to ballots counted, you may want to bundle these envelopes into batches, and number the batches for auditing purposes.

SAMPLE FORM – Place on ballot envelopes of 20 or more

DATA ENTRY LOG STRIP	
Date Entered _____	Batch Number _____
Total Number Entered _____	
Staff Initials _____	

Replacement Ballots (if permitted by state law)

A replacement ballot is issued when a voter requests by phone, in writing or in person a second ballot because the original ballot was destroyed, spoiled, lost or not received. If required, the voter must complete and sign a replacement ballot request form. Once a request for a replacement ballot has been received, the election official must:

- Verify that the voter has not voted another ballot
- Record that the voter has been issued a replacement ballot
- Issue the replacement ballot by mail or other means

Ballot Processing

Based on State law and/or local policies and procedures, ballot envelopes are authorized to be opened. This process is done in several stages and is managed by separate teams of staff.

- The first stage is opening the ballot envelopes and verifying that the batch contains the number of envelopes as noted on the data entry log strip. If the envelopes have been stored in batches, the opening team must keep the envelopes within their batches through the opening process. *NOTE: It is recommended that envelopes opened each day be processed completely and securely stored at the end of the day.*
- The second stage is separating the ballot from the envelope. During this stage the ballots are pulled from envelopes and the envelopes are immediately placed into storage containers. *IMPORTANT REMINDER: Before storing ballot envelopes, recheck that all envelopes are empty.*
- The third stage is the review stage (depending upon State law). During the review stage, ballots are analyzed for possible duplication, i.e. damaged ballots, identifying marks, etc.
- The last stage is tabulation. The ballots move to the scanners, remaining in their original batches – and the total number of ballots scanned is validated at the time of tabulation. All scanned ballots are stored in batched in secured and/or tamper-evident sealed containers.

Ballot Review Process

Ballot review teams determine whether ballots should be counted, rejected or duplicated. The object of ballot review is to ensure that all ballots are machine-readable and that the voter's actual vote will be recorded accurately. If the ballot has damage or defects that would cause problems in tallying, the ballot may be duplicated, if provided by State law.



Based on State law, determine whether your jurisdiction is responsible for determining voter intent and at what stage of the process this is to be done (before tabulation or after attempted tabulation). If so, establish teams of two board members of differing political party affiliation to work together to determine voter intent.

The ballot review teams should also be trained to check for questionable marks and write-in votes at the same inspection.

Questionable marks are:

- marks that cannot be read by the ballot counting equipment
- a checkmark or an “X” in the voting area
- voting area completed too lightly
- voter’s choice not marked in the voting area, such as a write-in with an unmarked arrow or circle
- marks that could identify the voter
- marks indicating the voter’s change of mind and/or
- comments marked in the voting area

Determining Voter Intent

If the inspection board agrees on the voter’s intent, the ballot should be duplicated to reflect the voter’s intent and the duplicated ballot counted. If the inspection board does not agree on the voter’s intent, the ballot should be challenged and forwarded to the canvass board. NOTE: Jurisdictions should follow their State’s definition of what constitutes a vote and what will be counted as a vote (Section 301(a)(6) of the Help America Vote Act).

Examples of the ballot review are noted below for reference only:

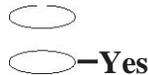
- The arrow or oval has been completed for one response and a dot or partially completed arrow or oval is marked for the other.



- The arrow or oval has not been marked, but the response is circled.



- The arrow or oval has not been marked but there is a connective line between the response and the arrow or oval to indicate the vote.



- More than one arrow or oval has been completed, but a word or mark is used to indicate the correct vote.



- A word has been used to indicate the vote instead of completing the arrow or the oval.



Duplication boards, regardless of the vote tally system used, process ballots requiring duplication, making a duplicate ballot that is machine-readable and reflects the voter's intent. Duplicating and proofing must be done by at least two election personnel each with a different party affiliation. Each worker should initial both ballots and complete a duplicate ballot log (example below). A unique duplicate number is assigned to each ballot to be duplicated for tracking and auditing purposes. NOTE; The original ballot is retained and is uniquely numbered to be easily identified with its duplicated ballot.

SAMPLE FORM

Duplicate Ballot Log

Date: _____

Election: _____

Batch	Ballot	Assigned	Reason (Be Specific) Ex:	Staff	Board	Date
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Number	Style and/or precinct	Duplicate Number	Torn – letter opener, from mail, etc. Check Mark – pencil, black ink, red ink, etc	Initial	Initial	

Ballot Tabulation

When the review teams have verified ballots for scanning, it is recommended that a form be prepared for each batch of ballots to be counted.

The form should include the originally assigned batch number and the number of ballots sent to the scanner, including any exceptions. Types of exceptions include: (1) no ballot in the envelope; (2) more than one ballot in the envelope; (3) ballot from wrong election in the envelope, etc.

By developing and maintaining an audit trail from the time that ballot envelopes are returned from the post office, through the initial sort, into the opening/separating and review process, at tabulation the audit team can verify that all ballots returned are accounted for – and have been either challenged or tabulated.

A sample ballot log transfer sheet is below:

SAMPLE FORM

BALLOT LOG TRANSFER SHEET

Election _____

Opening and Ballot Removal Team Report _____
(Team Initials)

Batch Number _____

Batch Date _____

Total in Batch _____

Exceptions: _____

Total Ballots Sent to Scanner _____



Scanning Team Report _____
(Team Initials)

Number Received To Be Scanned _____

Scanner # _____

Memory Card Assigned _____

Number Scanned (Count) _____

Number of Overvotes _____

Number of Blank Votes _____

Form is filed in master log book in batch number order and balanced to Return Mail Ballots by Batch Number Log assuring that all batches have been scanned.

It is recommended that ballots being counted in a centralized location on scanners be handled in batches. Each batch should be validated to the cumulative counter on the scanner. A central scanner log should be maintained detailing the batch numbers and total number of ballots scanned per batch. If the scanner uses a memory card, the memory card should be appropriately labeled and identified on the scanner log sheet. Below is an example of a scanner log sheet.

SAMPLE FORM

**SAMPLE FORM
Scanner Log Sheet**

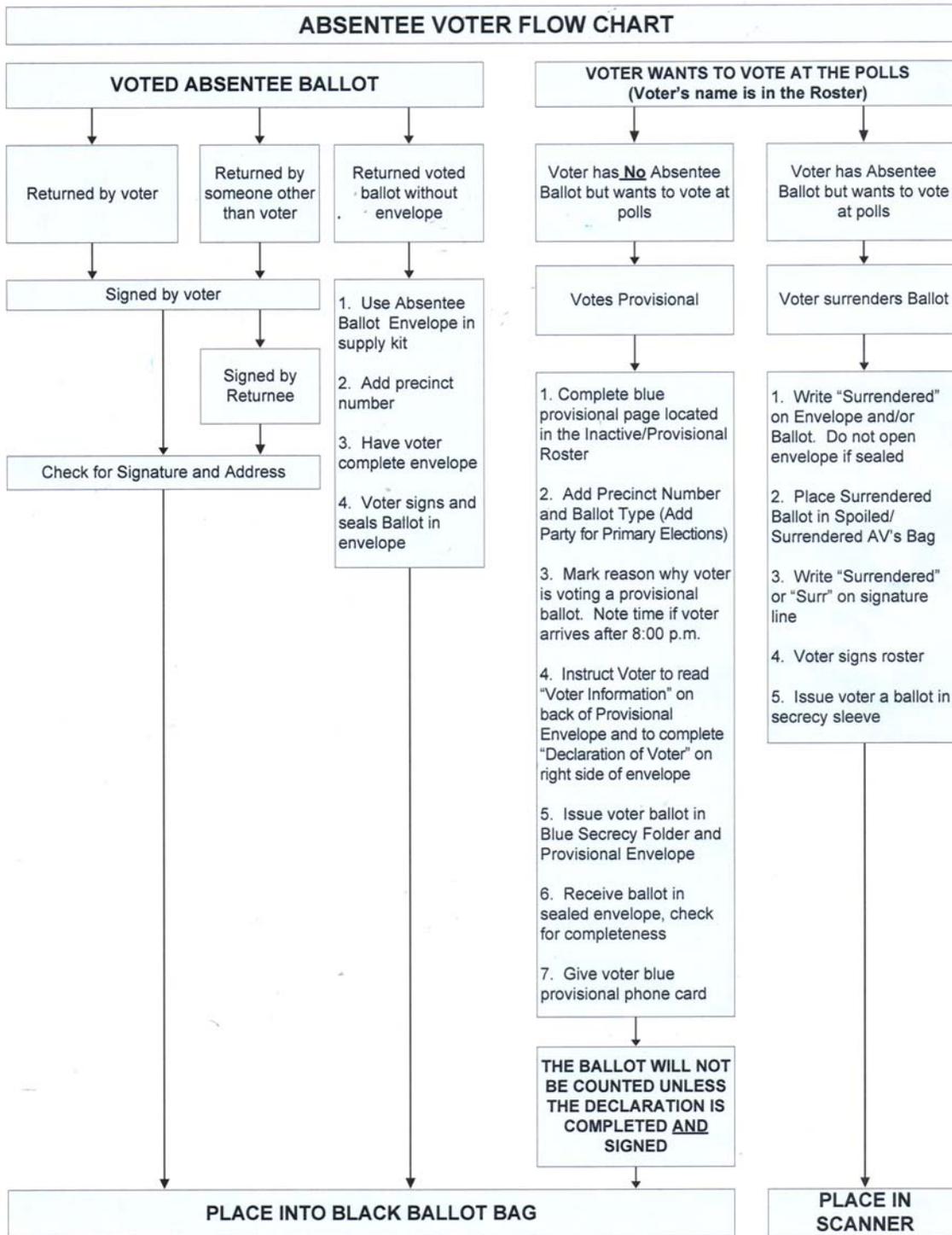
Election _____

Scanner #	Batch #	Count #	Blanks	Overvotes

Managing Absentee Ballots at the Polls on Election Day

Depending upon State law, internal procedures must be established for managing the return of absentee ballots at the polls on Election Day. These procedures must be incorporated within your poll worker training guidelines.

To assist poll workers on Election Day, prepare a visual flow chart detailing the steps to follow, based on the specific voter scenario. On the next page is an example of a flow chart for this purpose developed by an election jurisdiction in California:



Storage and Security

Storage:

All ballots and empty ballot envelopes should be boxed and sealed in tamper evident containers. Store all other records – ballot return logs, duplicate logs, scanner logs, etc. according to federal and your state’s retention rules.

***TIP:** Consider storing ballots by precinct for recount and/or auditing purposes.*

All challenged and/or provisional ballots that are not eligible to be counted should be stored separately.

Security

Prepare a written security plan on the processing of absentee/vote by mail ballots. The plan should include the following details:

- Security at the printing facility
- Security for periods of ballot transportation (e.g. from print shop to location of insertion; from mailing house to Post Office and from Post Office to election office other than regular mail delivery)
- Security for ballots during processing
- Security for ballot drop sites
- Guidelines for security involving observers
- Document the security of your office work area, building and ballot storage (alarms, cameras, special keys, limited keys)
- Document security for vote tally systems, computer access security and off-site storage for system backups.

At all times, ballots **must** be maintained in a secure location in accordance with your written security plan. Adequate supervision must be provided during all processing activities.

Establish and maintain a log of who has access (keys, electronic codes, etc.) to secure areas. To prevent unauthorized access, consider installing secondary locks accessible only to authorized Elections Officials on election-specific dates.

***Reminder :** Use of motion detectors, video cameras, alarm systems and other technology may be appropriate supplements to locks.*

Voter Education

It is important that election officials take extra efforts to inform voters of the proper way to vote their ballot and all other procedures required for returning the ballot envelope to ensure that their vote is counted.

Be sure to print clear concise instructions on the ballot with simple visual aids indicating how to fill in the oval or connect the lines to select their choices. The outside of the ballot envelope should contain a quick checklist and/or instructions to remind voters of common problems encountered, i.e. “Signature is required in order to count your ballot”, postage amount required, etc.

In order to ensure that all voters have access to information about voting absentee by mail, establish a variety of communication methods.

Listed below are examples:

- Create an informational brochure with instructions on how to vote absentee by mail. If permitted, include a copy of the vote by mail ballot application form as a “tear off return mail page” on the brochure. Make these brochures available at area city hall, libraries, etc. Distribute them at “Get Out the Vote” speaking engagements, community events, registration drives, etc. Example: *Be sure to include information about all aspects of voting by mail, including how to request a replacement ballot, and how to qualify to become a “permanent” vote by mail voter, if permitted by state law.*
- Post information about absentee vote by mail procedures on your jurisdiction’s web site. Information on all deadlines should be posted along with dates that voters can expect the ballots to be mailed. If voted ballots must be received in your office by a certain date, be sure to include that date in **BOLD**. If possible, include a downloadable copy of the vote by mail ballot application form, if required. Tip: *If permitted, consider including a link that allows voters to confirm their voter registration status and to request an early/absentee ballot from your web site. If their information needs to be updated, provide another link to a voter registration form, allowing the voter to manage their own updates at their convenience.*
- Provide this information to high schools, community colleges, and universities. Partner with these learning institutions to distribute voter registration and absentee voting instructions with enrollment packets. Encourage them to communicate election day deadlines for voter registration and absentee voting through the use of email, pod casting, and text messaging.
- Encourage candidates to provide information to voters about how to vote absentee by mail. Tip: *Provide a scripted handout to all candidates and encourage them to use it for all campaign literature to ensure consistency in all printed material.*

- Distribute absentee voting procedures brochure to special interest groups: nursing homes, assisted living centers, hospitals, military installations, etc.
- Utilize brochures, flyers, and your jurisdiction’s web site to inform the voter about how to ensure that the ballot will be counted. Provide answers to “frequently asked questions” such as: “Can I drop my voted absentee ballot at the polls on Election Day?”; “Will my ballot be counted if I mail it on Election Day?”; “I made a mistake while voting my ballot. How do I get a new ballot?”
- Provide your local and state media with any deadlines and requirements specific to absentee voting.