Quick Start Guide

Voting by Mail

About the Quick Start Guides: The EAC's Quick Start Guides are intended to familiarize local election officials with various topics they will likely encounter in election administration. The guides are a starting point to identify areas of concern and give officials a broad idea of factors they should consider in approaching a given topic.

Voting by Mail

Voting by mail is available in all states. However, how voters request, receive, and return their mailed ballots varies significantly across the country. In most states, voting by mail requires voters to make a formal request for a ballot to be mailed. Some states also require voters to provide a reason for requesting a mailed ballot, a witness signature, or other documentation before being issued a ballot. The election office then processes the application and mails the ballot to the voter. The voter receives and casts the ballot per the established procedures, and the elections office then processes the returned ballot to determine its validity. If valid, election officials tabulate the ballot, and its votes are included in the official results.

Ballot Preparation

- **Review** all of the deadlines relating to the preparation and distribution of ballots.
- **Prepare** a timeline detailing each activity in chronological order, including staff assignments and completion dates.
- **Determine** how many ballots to print by reviewing state law and voter turnout history for a similar election.
- **Develop** "Plan B" for how to respond to a ballot shortage. For example: Will you utilize ballot-on-demand printers? Do you have an action plan in place with your ballot printing vendor?
- **Incorporate** U.S. Postal Service intelligent mail barcodes on the ballot envelopes for ballot tracking.
- **Partner** with your area post office to optimize the official election mail logo on all outgoing and incoming ballot envelopes.
- **Coordinate** the design of the envelopes, placement of the wording, etc., with the postal authorities and request their written approval.

Ballot Reception

- **Develop** training manuals and conduct training sessions for all temporary staff assigned to the ballot reception operation.
- **Date and time stamp** each return ballot envelope.
- **Implement** daily logs to account for all returned ballot envelopes. Balance the logs daily to actual ballots received.
- **Confirm** the voter's name and address. If required, verify the voter's signature on the envelope.
- **Update** the voter record to indicate that the ballot envelope has been returned.
- **Separate** and log any challenged ballot envelopes.

Signature Verification Tip

Provide specialized staff training on signature verification. Consider implementing the "check it three times" policy for questionable signatures: first check is conducted by regular staff; second check is conducted by more experienced staff; third check is conducted by senior staff or the chief election official.

Ballot Tabulation

- **Develop** procedures for managing exceptions during the ballot opening process. Examples include: "No ballot in the envelope," "Too many ballots in the envelope," or "Ballot from the wrong election in the envelope."
- **Follow** state law and uniform administrative guidelines when determining voter intent.
- **Establish** written procedures for managing physically damaged ballots, ballots marks unreadable by the scanner, and write-in votes.
- **Establish** written procedures for manual duplication of voted ballots. Assign a number to the original ballot that ties it to the duplicate ballot. Work in teams, preferably bipartisan, to duplicate each ballot. Maintain a log indicating the reason for duplication.
- **Balance** the number of ballots scanned with the batch log totals regularly.