

PREPARING FOR INCREASED MAIL OR ABSENTEE BALLOTS DURING COVID-19

This document is one in a series created as part of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) Elections Infrastructure Government Coordinating Council and Sector Coordinating Council's Joint COVID Working Group. These documents provide guidance for state, local, tribal, and territorial election officials on how to administer and secure election infrastructure in light of the COVID-19 epidemic.

OVERVIEW

- Work closely with your state and regional USPS contacts.
- Prepare in advance:
 - Clean up data to ensure the format works for your vendors
 - Work with the United States Postal Service to design envelopes to ensure ballots can be mailed
 - Establish a chain of custody for counties to track ballots.
 - Evaluate staff needs to process additional ballots.
- Follow USPS best practices
 - Use Intelligent Mail Barcodes
 - Use green USPS 191 tags
 - Work with a mail piece design analyst
- Discuss anticipated increases in mail or absentee voting with your vendors as early as possible.
- Identify a safe and secure location to store additional mail or absentee ballots.
- Work with officials in your state to provide flexibility in the timeline for processing ballots.
- Review GCC/SCC documents on preparing for increased mail or absentee ballots including:
 - [Managing an Increase in Outbound Mail Ballots](#)
 - [Inbound Ballot Process](#)
 - [The Importance of Accurate Vote Data When Expanding Absentee or Mail Ballot Voting](#)
 - [Election Education and Outreach for Increased Absentee or Mail Voting](#)

The 2020 primaries saw a dramatic shift in the use of mail and absentee ballots. In Kentucky, absentee ballots usually represent less than 2% of votes in Kentucky. The 2020 primary [saw record turnout](#) of an estimated 1.1 million voters with an estimated 75% casting their ballot absentee. Similarly, [1.75 million mail ballots were requested in New York](#), 11 times more than usual. The Michigan presidential primary saw a [97% increase in absentee ballot requests](#) over their previous level from 2016. It is clear that jurisdictions will see record rates of mail and absentee voting in 2020.

Pennsylvania was poised to offer a larger number of absentee ballots in 2020 but saw a dramatic rise for their primary election. More than 1.8 million voters requested mail ballots, [almost 17 times](#) the number that requested to vote absentee in the previous presidential primary. Pennsylvania was able to handle the processing needs of this influx due to the availability of an online ballot application tool and a hotline they had established to assist voters that run into issues requesting their ballot. Secretary of State Kathy Boockvar told the EAC, “we were very thankful for the extra funds from the federal government to allow them to increase their staff and increase their equipment and increase every way, shape and form the ability for them to increase that extra volume.”

Many election officials will rely more heavily on ballot printing and mail processing vendors. However, some jurisdictions will be able to handle the increase of mail and absentee ballots on their own by processing the outgoing and incoming ballot packages with their staff. States that conduct all or most elections by mail typically begin working with vendors months in advance of Election Day. Vendors are purchasing new machines to increase capacity to meet the demands of the 2020 election, but have warned that they may not be able to obtain additional equipment in time to meet the needs of jurisdictions if they delay in placing orders for ballots.

EXPANDING PARTNERSHIPS FOR INCREASED MAIL OR ABSENTEE BALLOTS

A dramatic increase in mail or absentee ballots can lead to numerous challenges related to processing ballots, and further amplifies the need for a positive working relationship with the postal service and vendors. Increased use of mail and absentee ballots in the primary and lessons learned from states that conduct all elections by mail have helped to identify some of these potential issues before November.

Delaware Commissioner of Elections Anthony Albence credits working with the Postal Service representatives early in the process for success in rapidly increasing their mail ballot usage in 2020. Delaware’s rescheduled primary fell on the Tuesday after the Fourth of July mail holiday. Due to an established relationship, Albence was able to work closely with the postal service and regional election mail liaisons to develop a plan for delivery, recommending that officials “Lay that groundwork early. Don’t reach out just a day or week before the election. Develop a plan with them early. How are you going to plan with them to get mail if there’s a chokepoint?” He also recommends utilizing all tools that the Postal Service makes available for election officials, including the election mail kit that is distributed to jurisdictions and collaborating on design. “Over the years one of the pieces we learned is it is absolutely essential to utilize through the USPS the election mail design service.”

James City County, Virginia utilized a close working relationship with their Postmaster to ensure that every ballot legally cast was delivered on-time for processing. Speaking of their relationship, Elections Director Dianne Moorman told the EAC, “On election day, she (the Postmaster) actually got in her car and drove up to the processing center up in Richmond and

delivered the ballots that were still in the processing center that would have otherwise missed the deadline on Election Day. She brought back over 200 of those ballots for us to process.”

Barbara Goeckner, Clerk/Treasurer/Administrator of Cambridge, Wisconsin highlighted the importance of working with the Postal Service to prioritize applications during the application period and ballot return as Election Day approaches. She stressed the importance of including an intelligent mail barcode (IMB) on envelopes to track ballots in the mailing process. She also testified on her office’s use of USPS 191 tags. She explained for any officials unfamiliar with the tag, “It’s a lime green tag that the post office will provide you to attach it to your ballots. It’s to denote to the post office that these are ballots and they should be paid close attention to.”

Election officials in jurisdictions across the country faced reports of undelivered ballots. Officials in Chicago, Illinois attempted to thwart potential issues through the use of intelligent mail barcodes. Even with thorough planning, election officials should anticipate that unforeseen mailing issues may occur or that voters unfamiliar with voting by mail or absentee may not recognize their ballot packet in the mail. Officials should establish crisis plans for communicating voting options to voters and ensure that voting locations have the necessary provisional ballots to handle an influx of voters who report not receiving their ballots.

ESTABLISHING STAFF LEVELS AND PROCESSING OF MAIL OR ABSENTEE BALLOTS

Additionally, election officials have to address where and how to safely store an increased number of mail ballots. Officials should work to identify secure locations now to allow for adequate planning on set up and security for operations.

Richmond County, Georgia saw an increase of mailed ballots from about 1,000 in previous elections to 30,000 in the primary. Board of Elections Executive Director Lynn Bailey stated, “With the influx of paper ballots, one of our biggest challenges was finding secure storage space for all the paper. We were fortunate in some ways, I guess, that our building was closed for weeks for about seven weeks prior to the election. We were able to commandeer various conference rooms around the building and even set up tables working in the hall. We tripled our staff. And attempted to keep everyone safe and distanced from each other.”

James City County, Virginia, also ran into similar space issues. Elections Director Dianne Moorman told the EAC, “We also had the rearranging of the office space. We didn’t realize at the time that we were going to have to shift the entire operation of what my office and my building did here in a very compromised space to make those ballots available and for us to be able to process by mail the huge increase that we had. So having to rearrange an entire building to make sure that that is able to accommodate what our new needs are is going to be a huge thing also going into November.”

PROCESSING TIMELINES

Ballot preparation and tabulation of the number of ballots expected in November will require an increase in staff and could require legal changes to allow for timely reporting of results. While some states with extensive vote by mail or absentee voting rates begin processing their ballots weeks before Election Day, some that have traditionally low absentee voting rates do not begin processing until Election Day or sometimes later. Election officials are setting the expectation that there will be an increase in unprocessed ballots on Election Day. Results posted on Election Day are unofficial and are not official until the certification of the election. The public and media should expect that the results will change over time as those ballots get processed. This is a normal part of the election process. Iowa Secretary of State Paul Pate has attempted to make this point clear to the press, telling the EAC, “we’re spending a lot of time trying to explain to them that our goal is to give you accurate election results. It’s not a race to get out the election results the fastest.” Officials should work to provide flexibility in the timing of their ballot processing to ease these burdens.

Louisiana has worked to ease the pressures of Election Day. Through collaboration with legislators, the elections office will be permitted to allow election staff to begin preparing ballots for processing two days before Election Day. They also have altered their procedures to allow for processing of ballots to begin earlier on Election Day. Secretary of State Kyle Ardoin stressed the importance of timely processing stating, “We’re going to have to start tabulation early on Election Day--much earlier than they’re used to...because the expectation is there.”

Officials in Delaware also advocated for additional time to process ballots before Election Day and were granted a 30 day period to process ballots. Officials are hopeful that the advance preparation of ballots will allow for a quick turnaround for certification and recommend that other jurisdictions work to allow advanced processing. Anthony Albence, Commissioner of Elections, stated “You don’t want to be in the situation to be rushing.”

Pennsylvania was previously one of four states that required election officials to wait until the close of polls on Election Day to begin processing absentee ballots. A recent [change of the law](#) will allow them to begin processing their ballots the morning of Election Day, providing crucial hours to begin counting a large portion of their votes cast.