

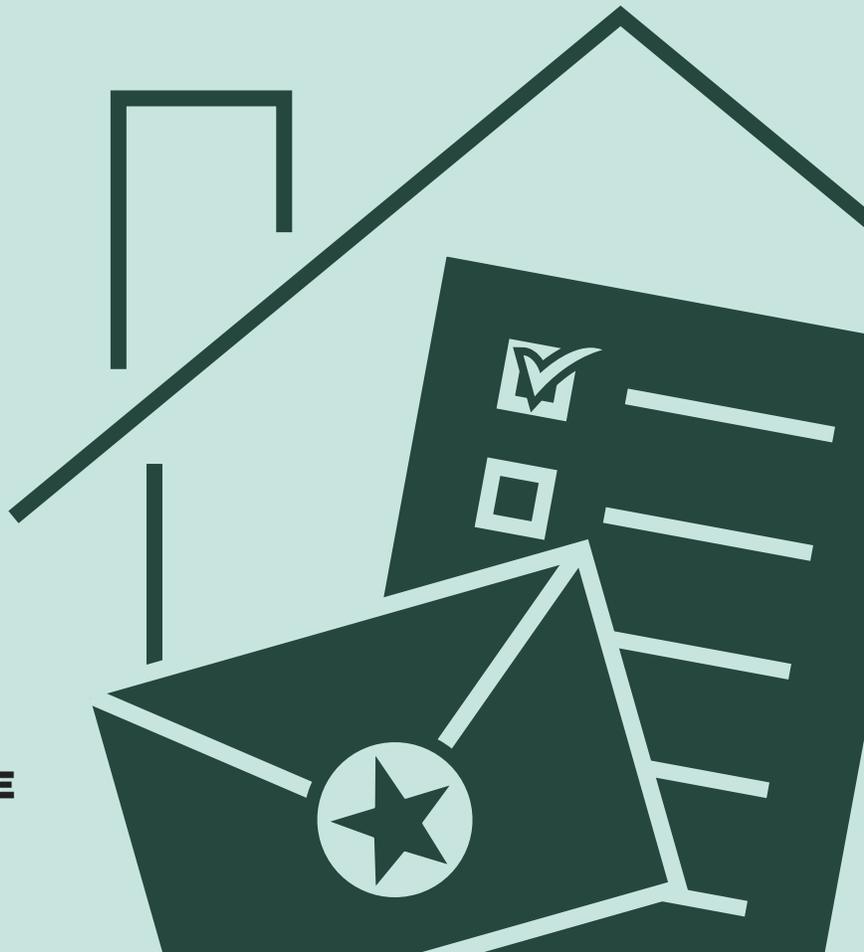


July, 2020

Vote By Mail for Secure Elections in 2020 — and Beyond

A Step-by-Step Guide for Illinois

In-depth materials and guidelines for local election administrators, secretaries of states, legislators, and advocates to help Illinois handle more mailed-out ballots.



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VOTE at HOME

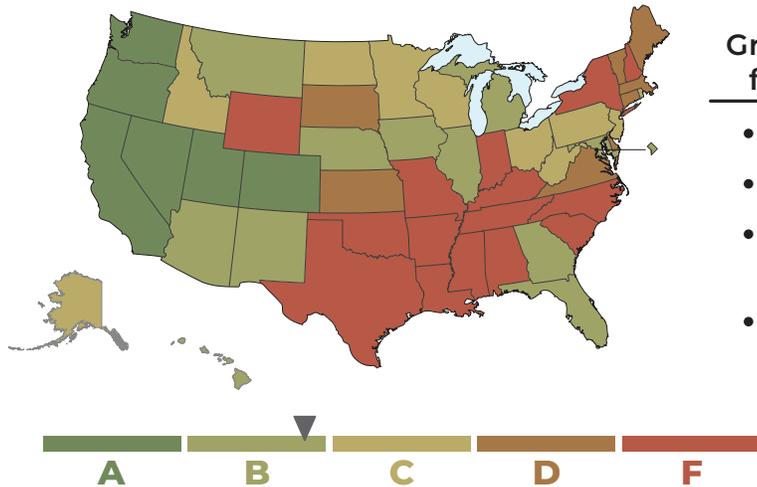
www.Sightline.org/SecureElections2020

Voting in Illinois



Illinois has roughly 8.8 million registered voters in its 108 counties, ranging from 3,015 in Pope County to 1.7 million in Cook County. In 2018, 9 percent of Illinoisans voted absentee. This ranged from no absentee ballots in several counties to 54 percent in Piatt County.

In the state's March 17 primary, 28 percent of registered voters cast a ballot, which is comparable to turnout in recent presidential primaries. Of those voters, 10 percent cast ballots by mail—up from 3 percent in the 2016 primary. In May 2020 both chambers of the Illinois legislature passed a bill that would require state election administrators to send absentee ballot applications to every active registered voter in advance of the November election. The bill awaits Governor J. B. Pritzker's signature.



Grades based on 15 factors covering

- Ease of access
- Ballot security
- Election infrastructure
- Administrative efficiency

Illinois' grade for Vote By Mail preparedness



Ways in which Illinois is already prepared



- Will mail Vote By Mail applications to all active voters before November.
- Allows early in-person voting starting 40 days before Election Day.
- Gives voters sufficient opportunity to cure signature problems.
- Allows any voter to request an absentee ballot.
- Is a member of the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC).
- Uses voters' signatures to verify ballots.
- Accepts mailed ballots postmarked on Election Day.
- Allows anyone to return sealed ballots in person.
- Allows voters to register online.

Who We Are

Sightline is a nonpartisan nonprofit think tank with a 25-year history. We are based in the Pacific Northwest, where many states already conduct all-mail elections. We are grateful for feedback and research from many policy experts, elections officials, and leaders committed to safe, secure democracy, particularly the National Conference of State Legislators and the [National Vote at Home Institute](#).

The Moment

American election officials face an urgent challenge to secure the 2020 elections. As poll workers and voters grapple with the coronavirus pandemic, many jurisdictions are already unable to find enough workers to run their usual polling places, and many Americans are seeking to cast their ballot from home, rather than risk contagion in a crowded polling place in November.

About This Resource

We hope that Illinois election officials, advocates, and legislators will find this resource useful as they work to handle more Vote By Mail ballots in 2020 and beyond.

Local election officials and **secretaries of state** will find in-depth information including practical nuts-and-bolts advice, materials and guidelines from election administrators with experience in conducting all-mail elections, and information about vendors and costs.

Legislators will find tried-and-tested policies, along with sample language from states that have successfully implemented those policies. Even if Illinois lawmakers don't act in time for November 2020, the experience of hastily trying to secure elections this year may create a greater political appetite for reforms to strengthen democracy in Illinois beyond 2020.

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For Local Election Officials

1. Coordinate with USPS.

To ensure that the United States Postal Service (USPS) is able to process ballots in a timely manner, election administrators can [contact the local USPS](#) election mail coordinator to discuss the design, timing and volume of election materials. The USPS can review all materials to ensure the design, wording, and colors meet their guidelines, and sign off on the printer's proofs. Election administrators can also discuss the date, time, and location for delivery of ballots to the Post Office, to ensure the Post Office is prepared. For example, King County, Washington, election administrators send a letter alerting USPS to the number, type, and timing of ballots they expect to deliver each election.

USPS may also be able to help election administrators access the National Change of Address Linkage (NCOA) to update voters' addresses. Illinois is already a member of the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC) which uses NCOA data to help Illinois keep voter lists up-to-date. However, voters may have moved since the last state update and local officials can access the latest address information for their voters. Having the most up-to-date addresses will ensure each ballot reaches the right voter, reducing the costs of re-mailing ballots.

Resources:

- Look up your [local point of contact at the USPS](#).¹
- [USPS Election Mail Kit](#).²
- Follow [USPS Election Mail guidelines](#).³
- Election officials can report problems to USPS through [electionmail.org](#).⁴
- A 2020 [webinar](#) on [best practices for tracking and reporting](#), and the [slides](#)⁵
- CISA Guidance on [Managing an Increase in Outbound Ballots](#)⁶
- [Vote at Home Policy and Research Guide](#), pg 19.⁷

¹ <https://about.usps.com/gov-services/election-mail/political-mail-map.htm>

² <https://about.usps.com/kits/kit600.pdf>

³ <https://about.usps.com/gov-services/election-mail/>

⁴ <https://electionmail.org/>

⁵ <https://www.techandcivillife.org/vote-at-home/>

⁶ <https://www.in.gov/sos/elections/files/COVID-19%20Election%20GUIDANCE%20ONLY.pdf#page=56>

⁷ <https://www.voteathome.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/VAH-Policy-and-Research-Guide.pdf#page=19>

Example Guidance Language:

- [Oregon Procedures Manual 2020](#).⁸
- [Alaska Vote by Mail Project](#).⁹
- [Ohio Election Official Manual](#), pgs 5-22.¹⁰

2. Design ballots and envelopes that are easy to use.

Well-designed envelopes, ballots, forms, and instructions help voters fill out their ballots and return them without mistakes, decreasing processing time and minimizing the chance that ballots will be flagged, thrown out, or not counted. In contrast, poorly designed instructions or ballots can cause voters to fill out their ballot incorrectly or incompletely so that their vote is not counted.¹¹

Ensure election materials are easy so that voters who may be voting by mail for the first time don't make mistakes. For example, first-time absentee voters may not know they need to sign the outside of their envelope, so putting their name under the signature line and simple clear instructions can help prompt them and reduce the number of ballots that you need to spend extra time processing. Also, pre-filling the absentee application form can help voters complete it correctly (See Recommendation 10).

Color-coded envelopes can help the USPS sort the mail quickly and accurately, and including space for voters' contact information can help election officials reach voters promptly in the event of a missing or mismatched signature. Experienced election officials and design experts have developed guidelines and templates for election materials, as described in the resources below.

Another important way to assist voters is to design and distribute voter education booklets to help guide voters through the process. For example, Anchorage, Alaska moved to All Vote By Mail in 2018. In addition to a robust [community education campaign](#), the city extended hours for a call center in the month leading up to the election. Here's an example of their [voter information flyer](#). Make all the above voter materials and web

⁸ https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=26

⁹ https://www.muni.org/departments/assembly/clerk/elections/documents/vote%20by%20mail%20project%20final%20report%20mas%201026%20annual%20report_030819.pdf#page=5

¹⁰ https://www.ohiosos.gov/globalassets/elections/directives/2019/dir2019-11_eom.pdf#page=197

¹¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/opinions/dont-let-mail-in-voting-be-thwarted-by-badly-designed-ballots/2020/05/18/1cce7c56-5312-44a8-afa9-fb813970f854_video.html

portal available in multiple languages to reach all voters. In total, the Brennan Center for Justice estimates the cost for voter education materials at between [50 cents to 88 cents per person](#).

Resources:

- The Center for Civic Design¹² has a series [design guidelines for election officials](#), based on solid research and best practices. These include resources on designing envelopes and forms, such as: vote at home [envelopes and information](#), a field guide to [designing vote at home envelopes and ballots](#), Vote By Mail [envelope design](#), [writing ballot instructions voters can understand](#), [creating forms that help voters take action](#).¹³ They also have guidelines about educational materials, such as: How to [design voter education booklets and flyers](#), [creating accessible online information](#), and [Providing materials in multiple languages](#).¹⁴
- A 2020 [webinar](#) on [best practices for envelope design](#), and the [slides](#).¹⁵
- USPS guidance on [designing election mail](#).¹⁶
- A 2020 webinar on [preparing helpful supplementary materials](#); and the [slides](#) from Anchorage, Alaska which moved to all Vote By Mail in 2018.¹⁷
- Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency [Voter Education Guidance](#).¹⁸

Example Legislative Language:

Revised Codes Washington [29A.40.091](#). Envelopes, declaration, and instructions—Voter's oath—Overseas and service voters—Return of ballots—County auditor's name.¹⁹

Ballots and envelopes must have the date of election printed on them. Return envelopes must have space for a telephone number, which is used if the signature is mismatched.

¹² Jurisdictions in Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin have worked with the Center for Civic Design and 1 in 4 voters have used their designs.

¹³ <https://civicdesign.org/fieldguides/>

¹⁴ <https://civicdesign.org/fieldguides/>

¹⁵ <https://www.techandciviclelife.org/vote-at-home/>

¹⁶ <https://about.usps.com/election-mail/design-election-mail.htm>

¹⁷ <https://vimeo.com/393307242> and <https://www.techandciviclelife.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/PDF-VAH-Webinar-2-Preparing-helpful-supplementary-materials.pdf>

¹⁸ https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/election_education_outreach_absentee_508.pdf

¹⁹ <http://lawfilesexxt.leg.wa.gov/biennium/2019-20/Pdf/Bills/Session%20Laws/House/1520-S.SL.pdf>

Revised Codes Washington [29A.36](#). Ballots and other voting forms.²⁰

Detailed guidance on formatting, contracts with vendors, sample ballots, and instructions.

Example Guidance Language:

- Washington State [Ballot Format Checklist](#) 2019.²¹
- Washington Administrative Code [434-230](#) Ballots.²²
- Washington Administrative Code [434-230-010](#) Sample Ballots.²³
- Colorado [Elections Policy Manual](#), pg 26.²⁴
- Oregon [VBM Manual](#), pg 23.²⁵

3. Implement robust signature verification.

Illinois election officials already have experience verifying signatures to protect against fraud while also avoiding mistaken voter disenfranchisement.²⁶ As your county handles more ballots by mail due to COVID-19, here are steps you may take to implement efficient and effective signature verification.

First, digitize the voter signatures you have on file. The more signatures you can digitize, the more accurate the verification can be.²⁷ You can use signatures from each voter's registration, their absentee ballot request form, prior mailed ballots, and also their signatures from the DMV or other state agencies.

Second, train enough workers to inspect signatures. You can model your training program on procedures developed in Washington, Oregon, and Colorado (See Resources). Forensic scientists, possibly from yours or a neighboring state's patrol, can help train your workers.

Third, implement a two-stage signature review. In the first stage, trained workers or specialized equipment compares the signature on the envelope to the digitized signatures

²⁰ <https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=29A.36>

²¹ <https://www.sos.wa.gov/assets/elections/administrators/2019-ballot-format-checklist.pdf>

²² <https://apps.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=434-230>

²³ <https://apps.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=434-230-010&pdf=true>

²⁴ <https://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elections/policyManual/ElectionsPolicyManual.pdf#page=26>

²⁵ https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=23

²⁶ To verify the identity of voters who can't sign due to disability, you can give the option to fill out a form enabling them to use a signature stamp.

²⁷ <https://www.voteathome.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/VAH-Policy-and-Research-Guide.pdf#page=18>

on file. If the signatures match, the ballot is moved to an "accepted" pile, but if there is a discrepancy it is moved to a "flagged for further review" pile. In King County, Washington, trained inspectors flag around 2.5 percent of ballots during this initial review. Flagged ballots then go to another team of trained workers who closely examine the ballots and decide whether to accept or challenge them. King County inspectors challenge about 1 percent of signatures.

Finally, for all challenged signatures, notify voters and give them an opportunity to respond so that their ballot can still be counted.

Resources:

- The Colorado Secretary of State has a helpful "Signature Verification Guide" with examples.²⁸
- The elections administrator in King County, Washington has a Signature Verification Training presentation, including signature examples and examples of common problems with signatures.²⁹
- Voters' signatures change over time, so if you don't have a recent signature on file for a voter, you can ask them to update it. The elections administrator in King County, Washington has an example of a form they send to voters.³⁰ In preparation for moving to an All Vote By Mail election, Hawaii recently sent a postcard to all their registered voters asking for an updated signature for reference.³¹
- 45 minute [webinar](#) about signature verification from Oregon Secretary of State Elections Division.³²
- Election Assistance Commission [Signature Verification Cure Process](#).³³
- Tour of election facilities [King County, Washington](#).³⁴
- Oregon [signature stamp attestation](#) form.³⁵
- Hawaii [drive for signature updates](#) in advance of VBM primary.³⁶

²⁸ <https://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elections/docs/SignatureVerificationGuide.pdf>

²⁹ Zip file available at <https://aqua.kingcounty.gov/elections/docs/vbm/VBM-information.zip>. In folder "ballot processing," file called "Signature Verification training Updated.pptx"

³⁰ Zip file available at <https://aqua.kingcounty.gov/elections/docs/vbm/VBM-information.zip>. In folder "ballot processing," file called "Signature-update-letter-April-May 2016-English.pdf"

³¹ <https://elections.hawaii.gov/main/sign-sealed-and-counted-securing-your-vote/>

³² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKiYGONnNT0&feature=youtu.be>

³³ https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/electionofficials/vbm/Signature_Verification_Cure_Process.pdf

³⁴ <https://kingcounty.gov/depts/elections/education-and-outreach/take-a-tour.aspx>

³⁵ <https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/Documents/SEL540.pdf>

³⁶ <https://elections.hawaii.gov/main/sign-sealed-and-counted-securing-your-vote/>

- CISA [Ballot Verification](#) and [Signature Verification and Cure Process](#).³⁷

Example Legislative Language:

Revised Codes Washington [29A.40.110](#). Processing incoming ballots.³⁸

Verification may be conducted by approved automatic verification systems. Variation in signature between the return envelope and the registration record due to initials or common nicknames is permitted as long as the surname is the same and the handwriting matches.

Example Guidance Language:

- Washington Administrative Codes [434-250-120](#).³⁹
- Oregon [VBM Manual](#), pg 35; Oregon [Appendix on Evaluating Signatures](#).⁴⁰

4. Provide secure drop boxes.

In states that mail out all ballots, most voters return them to secure drop boxes, rather than via the USPS. To accommodate this, counties should provide enough drop boxes to make them easily accessible to all voters. Each county should have at least one box that is available 24/7; more populous counties should aim to have one drop box per 10,000 voters.

Many jurisdictions site some drop boxes inside government buildings. However, boxes available 24/7 are more frequently used than those inside buildings and only open during business hours. Outside drop boxes need to be in well-lit areas covered by security cameras. Boxes should also be secure, only allowing election officials to access ballots.

³⁷ <https://www.in.gov/sos/elections/files/COVID-19%20Election%20GUIDANCE%20ONLY.pdf#page=48> and <https://www.in.gov/sos/elections/files/COVID-19%20Election%20GUIDANCE%20ONLY.pdf#page=63>

³⁸ <https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=29A.40.110>

³⁹ <https://apps.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=434-250-120>

⁴⁰ https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=35 and https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=83

In 2018, Oregon and Washington,⁴¹ two states that mail out all ballots, had one drop box per 8,800⁴² and 10,000⁴³ voters, respectively. King County, Washington strategically sited its drop boxes to ensure that 95% of voters lived within [3 miles of a box](#). Election administrators should place drop boxes approximately one month before elections and publicize locations on their website and in local news outlets.

Election officials should be prepared for voters to drop off ballots in precincts and jurisdictions other than their own.

Cost/Savings:

- Drop boxes used in King County, Washington cost \$5,235 each and installation cost around \$20,000 to install a total of 37 drop boxes.⁴⁴
- In Pierce County, Washington each drop box cost between \$7,000 and \$10,000 to purchase and install.
- Other counties have paid between \$2,100 and \$3,500 to purchase and install drop boxes. Operational costs per box appear to be anywhere between \$300 to \$4,000 per box, per election season.⁴⁵

Resources:

- [Bipartisan Policy Center 2020](#).⁴⁶
- Mailed-Out Ballot Return Choices, National [Vote At Home Institute, 2018](#).⁴⁷
- Washington Counties [Ballot Drop Box Webinar](#).⁴⁸
- King County Ballot Drop Box resources detail their vendors, ballot collection procedures, and tier system, which is based on expected ballot volume.⁴⁹

⁴¹ <https://www.sos.wa.gov/assets/elections/ballot%20drop%20boxes%202019%20general%20election.pdf> ; <https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/general-election-2019.aspx>

⁴² In 2018, Oregon had 311 drop boxes (one per 8,800 voters) with 165 of those boxes available 24/7.

⁴³ In 2018, Washington had 471 drop boxes (one per 10,000 voters) with 323 of those boxes available 24/7. <https://www.sos.wa.gov/assets/elections/ballot%20drop%20boxes%202019%20general%20election.pdf> ; <https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/general-election-2019.aspx>

⁴⁴ <https://kingcounty.gov/~media/depts/elections/about-us/reports/bdol-expansion-plan.ashx?la=en>

⁴⁵ <https://wsac.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WSAC-et-al-v-State-of-Washington.pdf>

⁴⁶ <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Bipartisan-Elections-Task-Force-R01-crops.pdf#page=28>

⁴⁷ <https://www.voteathome.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Optimizing-ballot-return-choices.pdf>

⁴⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBRYsy9LlcU&feature=youtu.be>

⁴⁹ Zip file available at <https://aqua.kingcounty.gov/elections/docs/vbm/VBM-information.zip>. In folder "Ballot drop boxes," multiple files.

- [Laserfab Vote Armor](#) produces the heavy-duty drop boxes used in many states from Washington to Colorado.

Example Legislative Language:

Revised Code of Washington [29A.40.170](#). Ballot drop boxes.⁵⁰

Details required drop box security measures and requires at least one drop box per 15,000 voters.

Example Guidance Language:

- Washington State Clearinghouse Notification on [Ballot Drop Boxes in All Communities](#).⁵¹
- Washington Administrative Codes [434-250-100](#). Ballot deposit sites.⁵²
- Oregon [VBM Manual](#), pgs 10-15.⁵³

5. Provide Election Day voting centers for in-person voting.

Even if counties mail out all or most ballots, they should still provide in-person voting locations for those that prefer in-person voting, need additional assistance, or do not have a reliable mailing address. Each county should have at least one in-person center (it could be the county elections office), and more populous counties should aim to have one center per 30,000 voters. These locations will need an electronic poll book and the ability to print ballots on demand based on each voter's address.

Even states that conduct elections completely by mail still offer some in-person options. California mandates one voting center per 1,000 voters. In Oregon, voters can vote in-person at any county elections office. Though Colorado still opens voting centers on Election Day, the state was able to reduce the number of poll workers from 16,000 to

⁵⁰ <https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=29A.40.170>

⁵¹ <https://www.sos.wa.gov/assets/elections/auditorsctp/17-01%20ballot%20drop%20boxes%20in%20all%20communities.pdf>

⁵² <https://apps.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=434-250-100>

⁵³ https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=10

fewer than 4,000⁵⁴ after implementing Vote By Mail.⁵⁵ The shift decreased labor cost per vote from \$4.71 to \$1.96.

According to the GAO, costs for polling sites can range from free (if using an existing agency facility) to \$300 per day to rent a location. Employee costs to staff a voting center can range from \$100-\$235 per day.

Resources:

- [VAH 2018](#) - Mail out ballot return options.⁵⁶
- King County, Washington guidance on Vote Centers.⁵⁷

Example Legislative Language:

Revised Codes Washington [29A.40.160](#). Voting centers.⁵⁸

Each county must have a voting center, open from 18 days before the election, which must be accessible for voters with disabilities.

Example Guidance Language:

- Washington Administrative Code [434-250-105](#). Voting Centers.⁵⁹
- Colorado [Elections Policy Manual](#), pg 35.⁶⁰
- Oregon [VBM Manual](#), pgs 10-15.⁶¹

⁵⁴ <https://www.voteathome.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/VAH-Policy-and-Research-Guide.pdf>

⁵⁵ <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2016/03/colorado-voting-reforms-early-results>

⁵⁶ <https://www.voteathome.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Optimizing-ballot-return-choices.pdf>

⁵⁷ Zip file available at <https://aqua.kingcounty.gov/elections/docs/vbm/VBM-information.zip>. In folder "Vote centers."

⁵⁸ <https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=29A.40.160>

⁵⁹ <https://apps.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=434-250-105>

⁶⁰ <https://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elections/policyManual/ElectionsPolicyManual.pdf#page=35>

⁶¹ https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=10

6. Consider using a professional printer and ballot sorter.

Many counties use professional printers and ballot sorters rather than printing ballots and envelopes and sorting them in-house. The move can save money and increase staff efficiency. According to the Brennan Center, printing costs [21.4 to 35 cents per ballot](#). The volume efficiencies in moving to an all Vote By Mail system result in lower per-voter printing costs. In Colorado, per vote total printing costs decline from [\\$6.86 to \\$3.04 per voter](#) after implementing full Vote By Mail.

Resources:

- Many Northwest counties use [K&H Integrated Print Solutions](#) to securely print their ballots and envelopes.⁶²
- [Runbeck Election Services](#) has capacity to serve 10 percent of American voters.⁶³
- [BlueCrest](#) serves 30 counties.⁶⁴
- Many Oregon counties use Ryder Graphics⁶⁵ and Reprographics⁶⁶ to print and mail ballots.
- Some jurisdictions on the East Coast use Phoenix Graphics.⁶⁷
- Tri-Tek provides ballot sorting and signature verification services.⁶⁸

Example Guidance Language:

- Colorado [Elections Policy Manual](#), pg 26.⁶⁹
- Oregon [VBM Manual](#), pg 23.⁷⁰

⁶² <http://www.khprint.com/>

⁶³ <https://runbeck.net/>

⁶⁴ <https://www.bluecrestinc.com/solutions/vote-by-mail-relia-vote/>

⁶⁵ <http://rydergraphics.net/>

⁶⁶ <http://reproprinting.com/>

⁶⁷ <https://www.phoenix-graphics.com/absentee-mail>

⁶⁸ <https://tritektech.com/>

⁶⁹ <https://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elections/policyManual/ElectionsPolicyManual.pdf#page=26>

⁷⁰ https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=23

7. Count ballots at a secure centralized facility.

Counting ballots in a secure, centralized facility enhances election security, transparency, and efficiency. As noted in the resources section, election administrators in King County, Washington, count ballots in guarded facilities with continuous security camera monitoring, in addition to their ballot tracking system (See Recommendation 9). By setting up security surveillance equipment in ballot processing areas and streaming the footage online, voters can see for themselves how secure and transparent your vote counting procedures are. As with all election procedures, prepare for election day by rehearsing processes and timing various stages.

To the extent possible according to your state laws, counties that don't have an appropriate facility could coordinate with counties that do.

Resources:

- [FAQ](#) and [more information](#) about security and accountability from King County, Washington.⁷¹
- CISA [Inbound Ballot Process Recommendations](#).⁷²

Example Guidance Language:

- Washington Administrative Codes [434-261-045](#). Secure Storage.⁷³
- Oregon [VBM Manual](#), pg 8.⁷⁴

⁷¹ <https://kingcounty.gov/depts/elections/about-us/security-and-accountability/frequently-asked-questions.aspx> and <https://www.kingcounty.gov/depts/elections/about-us/security-and-accountability.aspx>

⁷² <https://www.in.gov/sos/elections/files/COVID-19%20Election%20GUIDANCE%20ONLY.pdf#page=43>

⁷³ <https://apps.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=434-261-045>

⁷⁴ https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=8

8. Include a postage-prepaid return envelope.

Seventeen states require the government to prepay return postage for absentee ballots.⁷⁵ Twenty-two states leave it up to counties whether they will pay for return postage, either by explicitly giving counties the option or by saying nothing in legislation about who pays postage.⁷⁶

Just ten states, including Illinois, require *voters* to pay postage, meaning local officials are prohibited from taking initiative and prepaying postage.⁷⁷ The Illinois legislature would need to revise the law to pay for postage or at least give each county the option to do so.

Resources:

- [USPS](#) fact sheet on how Business Reply Mail® (BRM) and Qualified Business Reply Mail™ (QBRM™) enable you to pay the return postage for only the ballots returned to your election office.⁷⁸

Example Legislative Language:

Revised Codes of Washington [29A.40.091](#). Envelopes, declaration, and instructions—Voter's oath—Overseas and service voters—Return of ballots—County auditor's name.⁷⁹ Return envelopes for all ballots must include prepaid postage.

Example Guidance Language:

- Arizona [Elections Procedures Manual](#), pg 54.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Arizona, California, Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin. See <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/vopp-table-12-states-with-postage-paid-election-mail.aspx>

⁷⁶ Alabama, Arkansas, Connecticut, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island (some voters), South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Wyoming

⁷⁷ Alaska, Colorado, Illinois, Montana, Nebraska, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, Texas

⁷⁸ <https://about.usps.com/kits/kit600.pdf#page=15>

⁷⁹ <https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=29A.40.091>

⁸⁰ https://azsos.gov/sites/default/files/2019_ELECTIONS_PROCEDURES_MANUAL_APPROVED.pdf#page=68

For Secretaries of State

Clerks could independently implement these, but a coordinated statewide effort would be more effective.

9. Use a comprehensive system to track ballots.

Comprehensive ballot tracking improves the security of absentee ballots and boosts voter confidence in mailed-out ballots. The service, offered by companies like Ballot Scout⁸¹ and BallotTrax⁸², uses intelligent barcodes to track every ballot and envelope, minimizing the risk of stolen or tampered ballots. It also increases transparency and accountability because voters can easily track when their ballot is on its way, received by election officials, and counted.

Ten states [require](#) tracking for absentee ballots⁸³ and thirty other states have some form of ballot tracking, though it is not [required](#) by statute. These tracking services may not be comprehensive. For example, in many states, voters can look up whether their ballot has been mailed but may not be able to find out if it has been accepted. In contrast, Ballot Scout and Ballot Trax's comprehensive services can text voters about every step in their ballot's journey from being mailed, to arriving at their house, to being accepted. This gives voters a much higher degree of confidence about the system. That confidence could be especially important this year when many voters will be voting absentee for the first time, and questions are swirling about the security of mailed ballots.

By implementing a comprehensive ballot tracking system, Illinois can avoid problems such as those experienced in Wisconsin in their April 2020 primary. If Wisconsin election officials had had comprehensive secure ballot tracking in place during their recent primary, they would have seen that thousands of ballots got stuck in mail processing centers. This information would have given them the opportunity to contact USPS and address the problem before thousands of voters were denied the ability to safely vote at home even though they had requested their ballot in time.

Ballot tracking is cost-effective. For many states, depending on the number of voters and other implementation details, the software may cost around [\\$50,000](#) per year. Although it would be most effective for the Secretary of State to enact statewide tracking, if they do

⁸¹ <https://www.democracy.works/ballot-scout/>

⁸² <https://ballottrax.com/>

⁸³ California, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Iowa, Maryland, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, Virginia

not then local officials could step in. City or county administrators can sign up for local service, likely at a cost of a few thousand dollars per year.⁸⁴

Example Legislative Language:

California Election Code [§ 3017 \(c\)](#). **Vote By Mail Application and Voting Procedures.**⁸⁵

The elections official shall establish procedures to track and confirm the receipt of voted Vote By Mail ballots and to make this information available by means of online access using the county's elections division Internet Web site.

Fla. Stat. [§ 101.62\(1\)\(c\)](#). **Request for Vote By Mail ballots.**⁸⁶

Upon receiving a request for a Vote By Mail ballot from an absent voter, the supervisor of elections shall notify the voter of the free access system that has been designated by the department for determining the status of his or her Vote By Mail ballot.

N.H. Rev. Stat. [§ 657:26](#). **Absentee Voter Website.**⁸⁷

The secretary of state shall make available a public website by which an absentee voter, in every state election, may determine whether the voter's absentee ballot request has been received by the clerk, whether the absentee ballot has been sent pursuant to such request, whether the envelope purporting to contain the absentee ballot has been received by the clerk, and whether the absentee ballot was challenged and rejected by the moderator on election day, including the reason for the challenge.

Resources:

- A 2020 [webinar](#) from the Center on Tech and Civic Life on [best practices for tracking and reporting](#), and the [slides](#).⁸⁸
- USPS helps process Vote By Mail ballots with [Green Tag 191](#) and ballot-specific [Service Type Identifiers \(STIDs\)](#), using Intelligent Mail barcodes (IMB).⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Pasco County, Texas pays \$4,000 per year for Ballot Scout, and Milwaukie, Wisconsin could pay \$7,500 per year. <https://www.fastcompany.com/90501588/track-your-ballot-like-a-package-how-technology-will-smooth-the-way-for-novembers-mail-in-ballot-surge>

⁸⁵ https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displayText.xhtml?lawCode=ELEC&division=3.&title=&part=&chapter=1.&article=

⁸⁶ http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&URL=0100-0199/0101/Sections/0101.62.html

⁸⁷ <http://www.gencourt.state.nh.us/rsa/html/lxiii/657/657-mrg.htm>

⁸⁸ <https://www.techandcivillife.org/vote-at-home/>

⁸⁹ <https://about.usps.com/gov-services/election-mail/> and https://about.usps.com/postal-bulletin/2018/pb22498/html/cover_006.htm

- Denver's [Ballot Trace](#) lets voters opt in to receiving text messages when their ballot is mailed to them, when it is received by the election office, and when it has been approved for tabulation.
- [Ballot Scout](#) is a web-based ballot tracking tool that works with USPS to allow administrators and voters to track every ballot with the same ease as an Amazon package.
- Counties in California, Oregon, and Washington use [BallotTrax](#) to track ballots.

Example Guidance Language:

- [Oregon Secretary of State's Vote By Mail Procedures Manual 2020](#).⁹⁰

10. Mail absentee application forms to every registered voter.

Mailing absentee application forms to every registered voter in Illinois will increase absentee voting, reducing crowds on election day that could spread COVID-19. Several counties in Wisconsin mailed out absentee ballot application forms in advance of the April 2020 primary to great success: 67 percent voted⁹¹ (a high turnout for a primary) and 90 percent of those voted absentee, leaving polling places uncrowded for the few voters who came in-person.⁹² In the absence of leadership at the state level, counties officials could individually choose to mail out application forms to voters in their jurisdiction, but it would be more effective as a coordinated statewide effort.

In addition to boosting absentee voting rates, mailing out application forms can provide two more benefits: the signed form will provide clerks with a recent voter signature to use when verifying the ballot (See Recommendation 3), and it will help clerks update voter addresses so that more ballots will reach voters in November. To give enough time for undeliverables to come back to the clerk's office and for them to follow up with those voters to find out their current mailing address, aim to mail out application forms at least two months in advance of the election. To get a higher level of uptake, pre-fill the forms with information on file about that voter (such as name and address). That way voters can

⁹⁰ https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=26

⁹¹ <http://www.wfbvillage.org/DocumentCenter/View/1091/April-2020--Election-Results>

⁹² <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2020/04/whitefish-bay-coronavirus/>

review, update as needed, sign and return. Use plain language to ensure voters fill out the form correctly, saving clerks time (See Recommendation 2).

In Illinois, state law does not give election officials the option to send applications to voters. To allow clerks to take initiative and mail applications to registered voters, the legislature could change state law. Lawmakers could also go a step further and mandate that clerks mail out application forms and provide them the funds to do so, which would further increase Vote By Mail participation. To save the substantial cost of mailing and processing absentee application forms each time, the legislature could allow a "single sign-up" option so that voters who want to continue voting absentee can do so without further paperwork (See Recommendation 12).

Resources:

- CISA Guidance on [Helping Voters Request a Mail in Ballot](#).⁹³

⁹³ <https://www.in.gov/sos/elections/files/COVID-19%20Election%20GUIDANCE%20ONLY.pdf#page=70>

For Lawmakers

11. Account for voters with non-traditional addresses.

Native American voters living on tribal lands often have non-USPS-standard mailing addresses, making it difficult for them to register to vote and receive ballots in the mail. They may have many family members living at the same address, and some states may not allow them all to receive a ballot. Or they may use a USPS box to receive mail, but live far from the nearest USPS office or election center, making it more difficult to receive and return their ballot in a timely fashion.⁹⁴ Eligible voters experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity may also not have a home address. Your state should make sure these voters can receive a ballot and securely vote.

Illinois should allow multiple eligible voters to use the same mailing address. Living with others to save on housing costs should not diminish any American's right to vote. Your state can allow native people to [designate a building on the Nation's land to receive their ballot](#). Especially in areas where people live far from a USPS office, you can temporarily install drop boxes or vote centers on tribal lands to ensure that voters have viable options for returning their ballots.

You can allow homeless community members to receive their ballots at a [shelter, park, motorhome](#), or other identifiable location. Alternatively, they can list the county elections office as their mailing address and pick up their ballots in person there. They can return their ballot to the elections office or a secure drop box.

Example Legislative Language:

Colorado Revised Statutes [1-2-102](#). Rules for determining residence.⁹⁵

For voter registration residence, voters can identify a location in the county that they return to regularly, such as a shelter, services provider, park, campground, vacant lot, business address, or other physical location. If the registration residence does not have a mailing address, voters must also provide a mailing address.

⁹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/22/mail-in-voting-native-americans-election>

⁹⁵ https://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/info_center/laws/Title1/Title1Article2.html

Oregon Revised Statutes [247.038](#). Registration of person who is homeless or resides in identifiable location.⁹⁶

Individuals who are homeless or reside in shelters, vehicles, marinas or other identifiable locations cannot be denied the opportunity to register to vote. Residence addresses can be descriptions of the physical location of the person or the office of the county clerk.

Revised Codes of Washington [29A.08.112](#). Voters without traditional residential addresses.⁹⁷

Voter registration accepts non-traditional addresses, defined as narrative descriptions of the voter's physical location. No person can be disqualified for lacking a traditional address. Voters must provide a mailing address. Tribes may designate a government building to serve as a mailing address for residents.

Example Guidance Language:

- Oregon [Vote By Mail Procedures Manual](#) and [Oregon Secretary of State](#).⁹⁸
- Colorado Secretary of State [FAQs](#) and [Election Rules](#).⁹⁹
- Washington State Clearinghouse Notification on [Voters Without Traditional Addresses](#).¹⁰⁰

12. Give voters a single sign-up option.

Twelve states plus DC give voters a "single sign-up" option whereby they can apply once to vote absentee and permanently continue receiving ballots in the mail unless they are removed from the permanent absentee voter list. These include the five states that conduct all elections by mail, plus Arizona, California, DC, Michigan, Montana, Nevada, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and DC. Another six states¹⁰¹ maintain a permanent absentee voter list for certain voters, usually those who are elderly and/or disabled.¹⁰²

⁹⁶ https://www.oregonlegislature.gov/bills_laws/ors/ors247.html

⁹⁷ <https://apps.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=29A.08.112>

⁹⁸ https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/Documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=19 and <https://sos.oregon.gov/voting/Pages/homeless-confidential.aspx>

⁹⁹ <https://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elections/FAQs/foreclosureHomelessFAQ.html> and https://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/rule_making/CurrentRules/8CCR1505-1/Rule2.pdf#page=3

¹⁰⁰ https://www.sos.wa.gov/_assets/elections/auditorsctp/19-04%20voters%20without%20traditional%20addresses.pdf

¹⁰¹ Kansas, Massachusetts, Missouri, New York, West Virginia, and Wisconsin

¹⁰² <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/absentee-and-early-voting.aspx>

However, thirty-two states, including yours, require all voters to apply for an absentee ballot every election, or every two years. But nearly [half or even two-thirds of absentee ballot applicants](#) also applied to vote absentee in the last major election cycle. Even if voters know they want to keep getting their ballot in the mail, they have to fill out paperwork again and again. Not only is this a burden for the voter, it's a drain on election officials who must process and enter application data every year. Minimizing paperwork by giving voters the option to sign up for a permanent absentee list could cut costs and save time.

The potential savings are significant. According to a [US Government Accountability Office report](#), in the 2008 presidential election, Contra Costa County in California spent \$1.37 per ballot to process permanent absentee ballots versus \$10.64 per ballot to process each nonpermanent absentee ballot. Much of the nearly eight fold administrative cost increase came from handling individual ballot requests.

In Illinois' March 17th primary, nearly 300,000 voters requested absentee ballots.¹⁰³ Most or all of those voters may wish to vote absentee again in November, but they will all have to apply again. If the state legislature acts quickly, it could create a single-signup option in 2020 and authorize election officials to send a postcard to any voter who already requested an absentee ballot this year asking if they want to opt-in to continue receiving ballots by mail. This would save resources for clerks and voters during this busy year.

Example Legislative Language:

Arizona [16-544](#). Permanent early voting list; civil penalty; violation; classification.¹⁰⁴

Voters can request permanent absentee ballots to in state addresses in writing or through an online portal. Notices are sent before elections to allow voters to change addresses or opt out of absentee voting. If the notice is undeliverable, the voter is moved off the permanent absentee list.

California Elections Code [3206](#). Permanent Vote By Mail Application and Procedures.¹⁰⁵

In counties that are not fully VBM, voters may request to be on the permanent Vote By Mail list. Voters can apply online. Permanent status ends if the voter does not vote in four consecutive state-wide general elections.

¹⁰³ <https://www.elections.il.gov/VotingAndRegistrationSystems/PreElectionCounts.aspx?MID=I0hIXuSrKLO%3d&T=637269105267976244>

¹⁰⁴ <https://www.azleg.gov/ars/16/00544.htm>

¹⁰⁵ http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=ELEC§ionNum=3206

Montana Code [13-13-212](#). Application for absentee ballot -- special provisions -- absentee ballot list for subsequent elections.¹⁰⁶

Voters can request permanent absentee ballots. They will be mailed ballots for subsequent elections as long as they have not filed a change of address with USPS. If they have, they are sent a form to request an address update.

New Jersey Statutes Annotated [19:63-3\(a\)\(1\)](#) Procedure for user of mail-in ballot.¹⁰⁷

Voters may choose to receive mail in ballots for all future elections. Voters can request in writing if they wish to no longer receive mail in ballots.

Nevada Revised Statutes § [293.3165\(1\)](#) Specialized procedure to request absent ballot for all elections at which registered voter is eligible to vote; requirements for issuing, voting and returning such absent ballot.¹⁰⁸

Nevada allows all voters to receive absentee ballots for all future elections. If the ballot is undeliverable or the voter has had their registration cancelled under [NRS 293.530](#).¹⁰⁹

Example Guidance Language:

- Arizona [Elections Procedures Manual](#), pg 49.¹¹⁰

13. Allow counties to start processing envelopes before Election Day.

Thirty-five states allow counties to start processing envelopes upon receipt or beginning 3 to 10 days before the election. Illinois is one of just 15 states that prohibit any processing prior to Election Day.

Election administrators need to process absentee ballots before they can tabulate the votes. Processing ballots includes verifying signatures, sorting and opening envelopes, and preparing ballots for tabulation. All of this can occur before Election Day, so that the actual

¹⁰⁶ https://leg.mt.gov/bills/mca/title_0130/chapter_0130/part_0020/section_0120/0130-0130-0020-0120.html

¹⁰⁷ https://nj.gov/state/dos-statutes-elections-19-60-63.shtml#ele_19_63_3

¹⁰⁸ <https://www.leg.state.nv.us/nrs/nrs-293.html#NRS293Sec3165>

¹⁰⁹ <https://www.leg.state.nv.us/nrs/nrs-293.html#NRS293Sec530>

¹¹⁰ https://azsos.gov/sites/default/files/2019_ELECTIONS_PROCEDURES_MANUAL_APPROVED.pdf#page=63

tabulation on Election Day can go as quickly as possible. Spreading the workload like this may also reduce the number of scanning machines needed, as by starting earlier, each machine will have more time to count ballots. Some machines are capable of shielding results until a specified time on Election Day so clerks could start vote tabulation before Election Day without anyone seeing results.

Resources:

- Video from [Multnomah County, Oregon](#).¹¹¹
- Video from [Lane County, Oregon](#).¹¹²
- [Bipartisan Policy Center 2020](#).¹¹³
- CISA [Ballot Scanning](#).¹¹⁴

Example Legislative Language:

Montana Code Annotated 2019 [13-13-241](#). Examination of absentee ballot signature envelopes -- deposit of absentee and unvoted ballots -- rulemaking.¹¹⁵

Officials may begin processing absentee ballots no sooner than 3 days before the election, opening the secrecy envelope and sorting ballots. Automatic tabulation may begin 1 day before Election Day.

Hawaii Revised Statutes Section [15-9\(2\)\(b\)](#). Return and receipt of absentee ballots.¹¹⁶

“Upon receipt of the return envelope from any person voting under this chapter, the clerk may prepare the ballots for counting.”

Example Guidance Language:

- Washington Administrative Code [434-250-110](#). Processing Ballots.¹¹⁷
- Oregon [VBM Manual](#), pg 36.¹¹⁸

¹¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XDKlci5FPs&feature=youtu.be>

¹¹² <https://vimeo.com/269755185>

¹¹³ https://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Bipartison_Elections-Task-Force_R01_crops.pdf#page=39

¹¹⁴ <https://www.in.gov/sos/elections/files/COVID-19%20Election%20GUIDANCE%20ONLY.pdf#page=51>

¹¹⁵ https://leg.mt.gov/bills/mca/title_0130/chapter_0130/part_0020/section_0410/0130-0130-0020-0410.html

¹¹⁶ https://www.capitol.hawaii.gov/hrscurrent/Vol01_Ch0001-0042F/HRS0015/HRS_0015-0009.htm.

¹¹⁷ <https://apps.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=434-250-110>

¹¹⁸ https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=36

14. Allow voters to request absentee ballots online.

Thirty-nine states and DC give voters the option to securely register to vote online.¹¹⁹ Twenty-three states allow voters to request absentee ballots online. An additional eleven states allow voters to send in their absentee ballot request via email, though some of these may still create a barrier for voters without access to a printer because they require voters to print the form, physically sign it, then scan it and attach to an email. Allowing voters to request absentee ballots digitally makes the entire process easier for everyone, especially during times of restricted mobility, like coronavirus shutdowns. For the voters, it increases their access to absentee options. And for the county clerks and state officials, it reduces the amount of paperwork involved and the amount of time spent on inputting data from physical requests into elections software systems.

Illinois's Secretary of State could provide a user-friendly, state-wide web portal where voters can request to receive a ballot in the mail, register to vote, update their address, track their ballot, cure signatures, and request replacement ballots.

Illinois law ties election administrators' hands by requiring absentee ballot requests to be on a physical piece of paper. Your state legislators could allow for modern, efficiency, and secure digital requests by changing state law.

Creating a secure online request system does require some upfront investment in digital infrastructure. For example, see Texas's online request form [here](#), or Idaho's online request form [here](#). You will need to integrate this new interface into your existing elections software.

Example Legislative Language:

Florida 2019 Statutes [101.62](#). Request for Vote By Mail ballots.¹²⁰

Supervisors of elections must inform voters requesting Vote By Mail ballots that there is a free access system to determine the ballot status.

¹¹⁹ <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/electronic-or-online-voter-registration.aspx#a>

¹²⁰ http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&URL=0100-0199/0101/Sections/0101.62.html

Code of Virginia § [24.2-711.1](#). Absentee ballots; confirmation of receipt; notice of reason for rejection.¹²¹

The Secretary of State must implement a free-access system for voters to track absentee applications and ballots.

15. Allow voters to request replacement ballots online.

Occasionally, voters might lose, destroy, spoil, or never receive their ballot in the mail. These voters need to be able to quickly, conveniently, and securely request a replacement. To best accommodate voters, especially during coronavirus, county clerks can give voters the option to request a replacement ballot not only in-person, but in writing, over the phone, or online.

To ensure security, election officials should only send replacement ballots once they confirm that the voter has not already voted. Unique barcodes on each ballot will ensure that only one ballot per voter is counted (See Recommendation 9). Each voter will only be able to vote once; if the election official receives two ballots with the same unique barcode, only the first one received will be counted.

Printing and mailing ballots costs between \$1.26 to \$2.35. Your state can reduce the need for replacement ballots by keeping voter records up to date and making it easy for voters to update their address online (See Recommendation 1).

Example Legislative Language:

Oregon Revised Statutes § [254.470 \(7\)](#). Procedures for conducting election by mail; rules.¹²²

Voters may obtain replacement ballots if the ballot is destroyed, lost, spoiled, or was not received. Replacement ballots need not be mailed if within 5 days of election. They will be available at the office of the county clerk.

¹²¹ <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode/title24.2/chapter7/section24.2-711.1/>

¹²² https://www.oregonlegislature.gov/bills_laws/ors/ors254.html

Revised Codes of Washington [29A.40.070](#). Date ballots mailed—Replacement ballots.¹²³

Registered voters may obtain replacement ballots if the ballot is destroyed, lost, spoiled or not received. The voter may obtain a replacement by telephone request, mail, electronically, or in person.

Example Guidance Language:

- [Oregon Procedures Manual 2020](#).¹²⁴
- Alaska Instructions for [Online Ballot Delivery](#).¹²⁵
- Minnesota [Absentee Voting Administration Guide](#), pg 30.¹²⁶

¹²³ <https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=29A.40.070>

¹²⁴ https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=51

¹²⁵ <http://www.elections.alaska.gov/Core/votingbyonline.php>

¹²⁶ <http://www.co.wadena.mn.us/DocumentCenter/View/904/absentee-voting-administration-guide#page=30>