

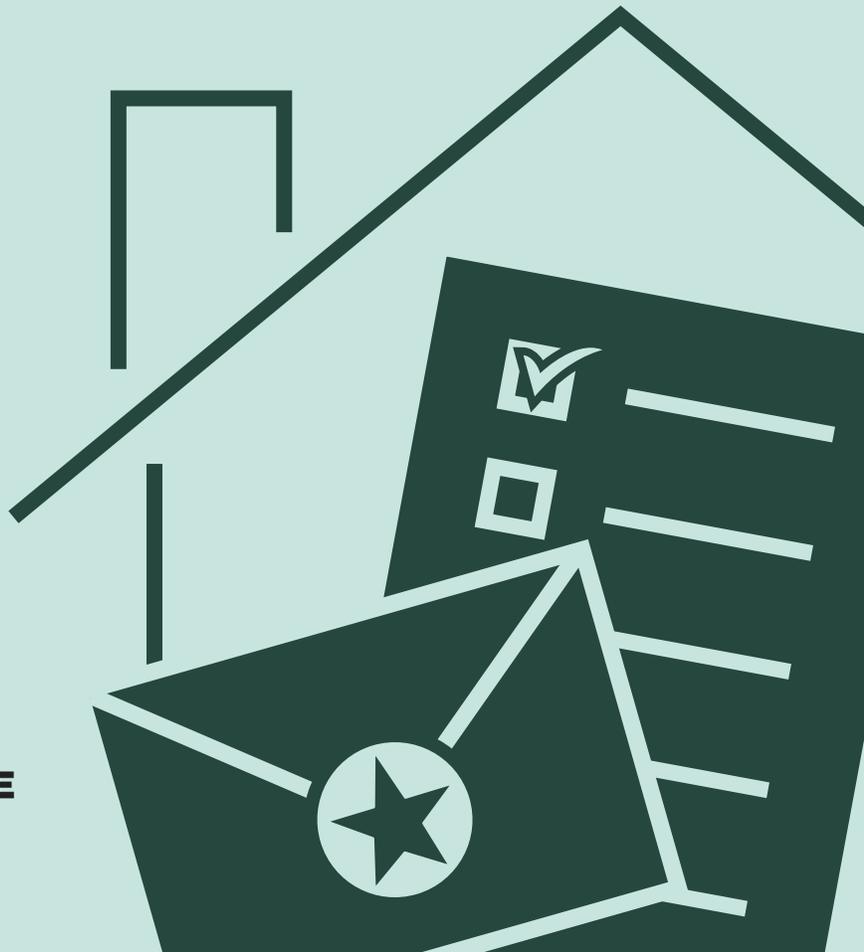


July, 2020

Vote By Mail for Secure Elections in 2020 — and Beyond

A Step-by-Step Guide for Iowa

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



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VOTE at HOME

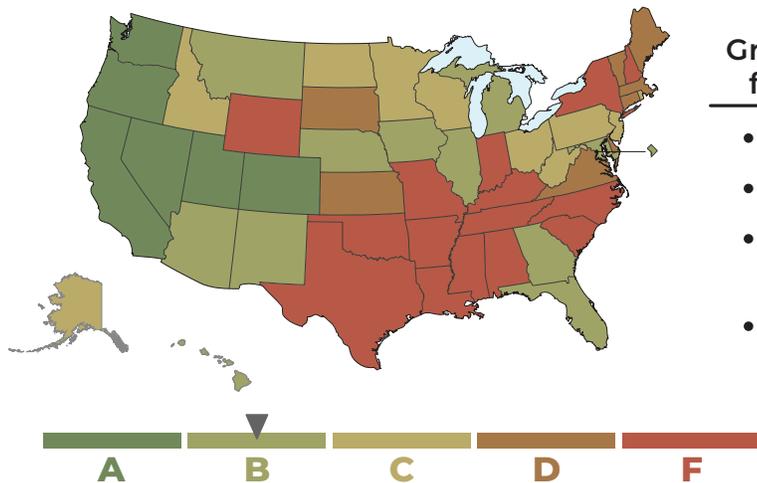
www.Sightline.org/SecureElections2020

Voting in Iowa



Iowa has nearly 2.2 million registered voters in its 99 counties, ranging from 2,929 in Adams County to 315,000 in Polk County. In 2018, 40 percent of Iowans voted absentee. This ranged from 26 percent in Worth County to 56 percent in Jefferson County.

In advance of the June 2, 2020, primary, Secretary of State Paul Pate mailed absentee ballot application forms to every registered voter and extended early voting by 11 days. Turnout hit a record high, with 24 percent of registered voters voting—an 8-percentage point jump compared with the previous two presidential primaries. Though some polling places were open on Election Day, nearly 80 percent of voters submitted their ballots by mail.



Grades based on 15 factors covering

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

Iowa's grade for Vote By Mail preparedness



Ways in which Iowa is already prepared



- Allows early in-person voting starting 29 days before Election Day.
- Provides a postage-prepaid return envelope for mailed ballots.
- Allows any voter to request an absentee ballot.
- Is a member of the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC).
- Uses voters' signatures to verify ballots.
- 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 Iowa 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 Iowa 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 Iowa beyond 2020.

Table of Contents

For Local Election Officials	7
1. Coordinate with USPS®.	1
2. Design ballots and envelopes that are easy to use.	2
3. Implement robust signature verification.	4
4. Provide secure drop boxes.	6
5. Provide Election Day voting centers for in-person voting.	8
6. Consider using a professional printer and ballot sorter.	10
7. Count ballots at a secure centralized facility.	11
8. Invest in high-speed centralized equipment.	11
For Secretaries of State	13
9. Use a comprehensive system to track ballots.	13
10. Mail absentee applications to every registered voter.	15
For Lawmakers	17
11. Account for voters with non-traditional addresses.	17
12. Give voters a single sign-up option.	18
13. Allow counties to start processing envelopes before Election Day.	20
14. Allow counties to accept ballots postmarked by Election Day.	22
15. Allow voters to request absentee ballots online	24
16. Allow voters to request replacement ballots online.	25
17. Allow community organizations to collect and deliver sealed ballots.	26
18. Automatically register voters and update their address.	27

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. Iowa is already a member of the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC) which uses NCOA data to help Iowa 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://lawfilesexternal.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.

Iowa 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.

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>

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 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

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>

- Hawaii [drive for signature updates](#) in advance of VBM primary.³⁶
- 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. Drop boxes are especially important if Iowa continues to require receipt of ballots by election day. Voters looking to turn their ballot in on election day can drop it at a drop box instead of dropping it in a mailbox and risking it missing the deadline (See Recommendation 13).

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.

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

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 box (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/Bipartison_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

8. Invest in high-speed centralized equipment.

High-speed equipment can check unique barcodes on envelopes, sort envelopes, compare signatures against digital files, and tabulate ballots. For the 17 counties in Iowa with 25,000 or more registered voters,⁷⁵ investing in centralized equipment will allow you to efficiently

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

⁷⁵ Black Hawk, Cerro Gordo, Clinton, Dallas, Des Moines, Dubuque, Jasper, Johnson, Linn, Muscatine, Polk, Pottawattamie, Scott, Story, Warren, Webster, Woodbury

process a high volume of absentee ballots. You will have reduced labor costs for every election for years to come. As your population increases, your high-speed equipment will be able to handle the increased number of ballots. Your county will be able to count ballots and finalize results faster.

Machines themselves may cost [in the range of \\$50,000 to \\$100,000](#),⁷⁶ but counties usually purchase a contract installation and maintenance along with a new machine, and the total costs can be steep. For example, in 2017, King County, Washington purchased new scanning equipment for an average of about \$130,000 per scanner. In 2015, Solano County, California purchased a machine plus five years of maintenance for [\\$482,388](#). And, in 2017, Anchorage, Alaska spent [\\$610,599](#) to purchase a Bell and Howell Envelope Intake and Signature Verification System, plus an additional \$56,790 contract for installation and continued support.

11 counties (Benton, Black Hawk, Clinton, Henry, Jasper, Johnson, Linn, Monona, Pottawattamie, Scott, Woodbury) have high-speed centralized tabulators. 8 counties (Cerro Gordo, Dallas, Des Moines, Dubuque, Polk, Story, Warren, Webster) have more than 25,000 registered voters and no centralized equipment of any speed. They might consider investing in equipment this year. Counties that are not able to handle the volume of mailed ballots could contact the counties that do have high-speed scanners and make arrangements to coordinate use of equipment.

Resources:

- NCSL's [Elections Technology Toolkit | Voting Machines and Beyond](#).⁷⁷
- Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency [Inbound Ballot Recommendations](#), pg 3.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/estimated-costs-covid-19-election-resiliency-measures>

⁷⁷ <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/elections-technology-toolkit.aspx>

⁷⁸ https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/inbound-ballot_process_final_508.pdf#page=3

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 Scout⁷⁹ and BallotTrax⁸⁰, 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 ballots⁸¹ 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, Iowa 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

⁷⁹ <https://www.democracy.works/ballot-scout/>

⁸⁰ <https://ballottrax.com/>

⁸¹ 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.⁸²

Example Legislative Language:

California Election Code [§ 3017 \(c\)](#). **Vote By Mail Application and Voting Procedures.**⁸³

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.**⁸⁴

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.**⁸⁵

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](#).⁸⁶
- USPS helps process Vote By Mail ballots with [Green Tag 191](#) and ballot-specific [Service Type Identifiers \(STIDs\)](#), using Intelligent Mail barcodes (IMB).⁸⁷

⁸² 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>

⁸³ https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displayText.xhtml?lawCode=ELEC&division=3.&title=&part=&chapter=1.&article=

⁸⁴ http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&URL=0100-0199/0101/Sections/0101.62.html

⁸⁵ <http://www.gencourt.state.nh.us/rsa/html/lxiii/657/657-mrg.htm>

⁸⁶ <https://www.techandcivicle.com/vote-at-home/>

⁸⁷ <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](#).⁸⁸

10. Mail absentee applications to every registered voter.

Mailing absentee application forms to every registered voter in Iowa 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 voted⁸⁹ (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.⁹⁰ 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

⁸⁸ https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=26

⁸⁹ <http://www.wfbvillage.org/DocumentCenter/View/1091/April-2020--Election-Results>

⁹⁰ <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).

Iowa law allows the secretary of state (or individual clerks) to choose whether to send applications to voters. The county will have to pay to print the and mail the application forms which should cost less than \$2.00 per voter,⁹¹ and will also pay for the labor of processing the forms. Because Iowa requires voters to fill out a form again for every election, you will need to pay to mail and process forms again in August and November. To save the substantial cost on local clerks 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](#).⁹²

⁹¹ <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/estimated-costs-covid-19-election-resiliency-measures>

⁹² <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.⁹³ 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.

Iowa 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.⁹⁴

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.

⁹³ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/22/mail-in-voting-native-americans-election>

⁹⁴ 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.⁹⁵

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.⁹⁶

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](#).⁹⁷
- Colorado Secretary of State [FAQs](#) and [Election Rules](#).⁹⁸
- Washington State Clearinghouse Notification on [Voters Without Traditional Addresses](#).⁹⁹

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 states¹⁰⁰ maintain a permanent absentee voter list for certain voters, usually those who are elderly and/or disabled.¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ https://www.oregonlegislature.gov/bills_laws/ors/ors247.html

⁹⁶ <https://apps.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=29A.08.112>

⁹⁷ https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/Documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=19 and <https://sos.oregon.gov/voting/Pages/homeless-confidential.aspx>

⁹⁸ <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

⁹⁹ <https://www.sos.wa.gov/assets/elections/auditorsctp/19-04%20voters%20without%20traditional%20addresses.pdf>

¹⁰⁰ Kansas, Massachusetts, Missouri, New York, West Virginia and Wisconsin

¹⁰¹ <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 Iowa's June 2nd primary, nearly half a million voters requested absentee ballots.¹⁰² While most or all of those voters may wish to vote absentee again in November, 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.¹⁰³

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.¹⁰⁴

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.

¹⁰² <https://sos.iowa.gov/elections/pdf/2020/primary/AbsenteeCounty2020.pdf>

¹⁰³ <https://www.azleg.gov/ars/16/00544.htm>

¹⁰⁴ 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.¹⁰⁵

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.¹⁰⁶

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.¹⁰⁷

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](#).¹⁰⁸

Example Guidance Language:

- Arizona [Elections Procedures Manual](#), pg 49.¹⁰⁹

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. Iowa 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 tabulation on Election Day can go as quickly as possible. Spreading the workload like this

¹⁰⁵ https://leg.mt.gov/bills/mca/title_0130/chapter_0130/part_0020/section_0120/0130-0130-0020-0120.html

¹⁰⁶ https://nj.gov/state/dos-statutes-elections-19-60-63.shtml#ele_19_63_3

¹⁰⁷ <https://www.leg.state.nv.us/nrs/nrs-293.html#NRS293Sec3165>

¹⁰⁸ <https://www.leg.state.nv.us/nrs/nrs-293.html#NRS293Sec530>

¹⁰⁹ https://azsos.gov/sites/default/files/2019_ELECTIONS_PROCEDURES_MANUAL_APPROVED.pdf#page=63

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](#).¹¹⁰
- Video from [Lane County, Oregon](#).¹¹¹
- [Bipartisan Policy Center 2020](#).¹¹²
- CISA [Ballot Scanning](#).¹¹³

Example Legislative Language:

Montana Code Annotated 2019 [13-13-241](#). Examination of absentee ballot signature envelopes -- deposit of absentee and unvoted ballots -- rulemaking.¹¹⁴

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.¹¹⁵

“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.¹¹⁶
- Oregon [VBM Manual](#), pg 36.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XDKlci5FPs&feature=youtu.be>

¹¹¹ <https://vimeo.com/269755185>

¹¹² https://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Bipartisan_Elections-Task-Force_R01_crops.pdf#page=39

¹¹³ <https://www.in.gov/sos/elections/files/COVID-19%20Election%20GUIDANCE%20ONLY.pdf#page=51>

¹¹⁴ https://leg.mt.gov/bills/mca/title_0130/chapter_0130/part_0020/section_0410/0130-0130-0020-0410.html

¹¹⁵ https://www.capitol.hawaii.gov/hrscurrent/Vol01_Ch0001-0042F/HRS0015/HRS_0015-0009.htm.

¹¹⁶ <https://apps.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=434-250-110>

¹¹⁷ https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=36

14. Allow counties to accept ballots postmarked by Election Day.

In 2018, 1.6 percent of mailed-out ballots in Iowa were rejected. But, of those that were rejected, 36 percent were rejected due to late receipt. That is more than 1,100 Iowa voters whose votes weren't counted. More Iowans are likely to want to vote absentee this year, and a similar rejection rate for ballots received after election day could disenfranchise even more voters.

Thirteen states¹¹⁸ accept ballots postmarked by election day and received within a certain period afterwards, usually around 10 days. This gives absentee voters the same freedom as in-person voters to mark their ballot and turn it in on election day. It also avoids confusion because voters don't have to guess how many days it could take the Postal Service to deliver their ballot; they know their deadline is election day. Allowing clerks to count ballots received or postmarked on election day and received within 10 days increases voter engagement and makes elections more representative of the people.

If you are not able to accept ballots received after election day, make this very clear to voters. In the ballot materials, tell voters not to put their ballot in the mail any later than the Wednesday before Election Day. And start running PSA's a few days before that to remind voters of the practical cut-off date, and that if they miss the deadline to drop it in the mail, they may drop it in a secure drop-box or at a voting center up until election day (See Recommendations 4 and 5).

Example Legislative Language:

Alaska Statutes § [15.20.081\(e\)](#). Absentee voting in general; applying for absentee ballot by mail or electronic transmission.¹¹⁹

Ballots must be postmarked by election day and received by the close of business on the 10th day after the election.

Illinois Compiled Statutes [10 § 5/19-8\(c\)](#). Time and place of counting ballots.¹²⁰ ICS [10 § 5/18A-15](#). Validating and counting provisional ballots.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Alabama, Alaska, California, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Texas, Washington, and West Virginia

¹¹⁹ <http://www.akleg.gov/basis/statutes.asp#15.20.081>

¹²⁰ <http://ilga.gov/legislation/ilcs/documents/001000050K19-8.htm>

¹²¹ <http://ilga.gov/legislation/ilcs/documents/001000050K18A-15.htm>

Ballots must be postmarked by election day. Ballots received after election day without postmark shall be accepted if the certification date is on or before election day. Ballots must be received by 14 days after the election.

Kansas Statutes [25-1132](#). Advance voting; delivery of ballots; where; deadline for receiving ballots.¹²²

Absentee ballots can be received after polls close as long as they were postmarked before or on election day and are received by 3 days after the election. This second standard is not recommended as USPS first class standard used to be 1-3 days, but is now 2-5 days.

Nevada Revised Statutes § [293.317\(1\)\(b\), \(2\)](#). Procedure for timely returning absent ballot; treatment of absent ballot when postmark cannot be determined.¹²³ **NRS [293.333\(2\)](#) Procedure for depositing absent ballots in ballot box; period for counting of absent ballots.**¹²⁴

Ballots must be postmarked on or before the date of the election and received by 7 days after the election. If postmark is illegible but ballot is received within 3 days of election, it is considered valid.

North Carolina General Statutes [163-231](#). Voting absentee ballots and transmitting them to the county board of elections.¹²⁵

Absentee ballots can be received after polls close as long as they were postmarked before or on election day and are received by 3 days after the election. This second standard is not recommended as USPS first class standard used to be 1-3 days, but is now 2-5 days.

Example Guidance Language:

- Alaska Administrative Code [25.560](#). Timeliness of absentee by-mail ballot.¹²⁶

¹²² http://www.kslegislature.org/li/b2019_20/statute/025_000_0000_chapter/025_011_0000_article/025_011_0032_section/025_011_0032_k/

¹²³ <https://www.leg.state.nv.us/nrs/nrs-293.html#NRS293Sec317>

¹²⁴ <https://www.leg.state.nv.us/nrs/nrs-293.html#NRS293Sec333>

¹²⁵ https://www.ncleg.net/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/HTML/ByChapter/Chapter_163.html

¹²⁶ <http://www.akleg.gov/basis/aac.asp#6.25.560>

15. Allow voters to request absentee ballots online

Thirty-nine states and DC give voters the option to securely register to vote online.¹²⁷

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.

Iowa'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.

Iowa 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.¹²⁸

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

¹²⁷ <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/electronic-or-online-voter-registration.aspx#a>

¹²⁸ 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.¹²⁹

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

16. 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 Recommendations 1 and 17).

Example Legislative Language:

Oregon Revised Statutes § [254.470 \(7\)](#). Procedures for conducting election by mail; rules.¹³⁰

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.

¹²⁹ <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode/title24.2/chapter7/section24.2-711.1/>

¹³⁰ https://www.oregonlegislature.gov/bills_laws/ors/ors254.html

Revised Codes of Washington [29A.40.070](#). Date ballots mailed—Replacement ballots.¹³¹

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](#).¹³²
- Alaska Instructions for [Online Ballot Delivery](#).¹³³
- Minnesota [Absentee Voting Administration Guide](#), pg 30.¹³⁴

17. Allow community organizations to collect and deliver sealed ballots.

Twenty states allow anyone to deliver another voter's sealed and signed ballot. By allowing community organizations to help deliver completed and signed ballots, Iowa can increase voter turnout and help further enfranchise voters who face difficulty voting. For example, this policy can help voters who may lack access to a vehicle or who do not have access to consistent mail service.¹³⁵

Ballot tracking and robust signature verification can prevent would-be ballot harvesters from collecting blank ballots and filling them in. Fraudsters can't access voters' signature files, and voters will notice if the tracking system reports their ballot as both delivered and returned, but they never received it.

¹³¹ <https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=29A.40.070>

¹³² https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=51

¹³³ <http://www.elections.alaska.gov/Core/votingbyonline.php>

¹³⁴ <http://www.co.wadena.mn.us/DocumentCenter/View/904/absentee-voting-administration-guide#page=30>

¹³⁵ <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/01/27/arizona-ballot-harvesting-law-discriminates-minority-voters-ninth-circuit/4589610002/>

Example Legislative Language:

Oregon Revised Statutes 254.470 (6)(d). Procedures for conducting election by mail.¹³⁶

Allows anyone to deliver a completed and sealed ballot, as long as they do so within 2 days of receiving the ballot from the voter.

18. Automatically register voters and update their address.

Seventeen states and DC [automatically register](#) eligible voters who prove their identity to a government agency such as the Department of Motor Vehicles.

It works like this: if a citizen interacts with an Iowa state agency like the DMV, the agency sends their information to the Secretary of State, who adds them to the voter rolls or updates their address. Iowa's Secretary of State then sends voters a postcard letting them know of the change so they can opt-out if they didn't want to be registered to vote, or return their voter registration to their previous address if they didn't really move.

This is more efficient and accurate than Iowa's "opt-in" process which requires voters to fill out change of address forms. By streamlining and updating their data across agencies, states with automatic registration have cleaner and more up-to-date voter lists, meaning mailed ballots are more likely to reach the voter. Citizens may always choose whether they want to be registered, but "opt-out" systems result in higher voter participation.

Resources:

- [Oregon Procedures Manual 2020](#).¹³⁷
- [Brennan Center study](#) on the impact of Automatic Voter Registration.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ <https://www.oregonlaws.org/ors/254.470>

¹³⁷ https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=16

¹³⁸ https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/publications/2019_04_AVR_Report_Final_0.pdf

Example Legislative Language:

Illinois Compiled Statutes [10 § 5/1A-16.1](#). Automatic voter registration; Secretary of State.¹³⁹

Most DMV interactions can serve as a dual purpose application for voter registration, address changes or name changes. No further identification is needed, but the Secretary of State will verify voter registration eligibility. Voters can opt out of registration during a DMV interaction. Other agencies are also implementing automatic voter registration.

Maryland Election Law Code Annotated § [3-203](#). Electronic Voter Registration System.¹⁴⁰

Most transactions at the DMV, Health Benefits Exchange, local departments of social services, and the mobility certification office will automatically transmit voter registration applications or updates unless the voter opts out.

Michigan State Constitution [§ 4 \(1\)\(d\)](#). Place and manner of elections. Michigan Compiled Laws [168.493a](#). Automatic voter registration; qualifications; option to opt-out; information added to qualified voter file; erroneous registration not a violation.¹⁴¹

Michigan constitutionally guarantees the right to be automatically registered to vote at the DMV. Most DMV interactions will lead to automatic voter registration or registration address updates unless the voter opts out or is not a citizen.

Oregon Revised Statutes [247.017](#). Transfer of voter registration materials to Secretary of State from Department of Transportation; opt-out of voter registration; rules.¹⁴²

The DMV provides the secretary of state with voter information including the electronic signature of every voter that qualifies to vote. County clerks then notify voters to allow voters to opt out or register a political party affiliation.

Example Guidance Language:

- Georgia and Colorado launched automatic voter registration [without state legislation](#).¹⁴³ Georgia initiated automatic voter registration by updating its drivers

¹³⁹ <http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/ilcs/documents/001000050K1A-16.1.htm>

¹⁴⁰ <https://codes.findlaw.com/md/election-law/md-code-elec-law-sect-3-203.html>

¹⁴¹ [http://www.legislature.mi.gov/\(S\(2hthlf15z4s0fhn5famvyrgo\)\)/mileg.aspx?page=getObject&objectName=mcl-168-493a](http://www.legislature.mi.gov/(S(2hthlf15z4s0fhn5famvyrgo))/mileg.aspx?page=getObject&objectName=mcl-168-493a)

¹⁴² https://www.oregonlegislature.gov/bills_laws/ors/ors247.html

¹⁴³ <https://www.ajc.com/news/state--regional-govt--politics/automatic-registration-leads-surge-new-georgia-voters/97PMHrv8anlB66TfKdlUtK/>

registration [form](#) in 2016.¹⁴⁴ The Department of Driver Services forwards new voter registration and information for updating purposes to the Secretary of State.

- Colorado administratively rolled out automatic voter registration at DMV locations in 2017. Colorado's automatic voter registration and updates can be seen in the license renewal and change of address [forms](#).¹⁴⁵ As of 2019, the Department of Health Care Policy and Financing is [statutorily](#) required to transmit voter registration information to the Secretary of State.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ https://dds.georgia.gov/sites/dds.georgia.gov/files/related_files/document/MAIL%20IN%20RENEWAL%20PACKET%20-%20February%202019%20UPD.pdf

¹⁴⁵ <https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/dmv/forms-licenses>

¹⁴⁶ <https://casetext.com/statute/colorado-revised-statutes/title-1-elections/general-primary-recall-and-congressional-vacancy-elections/article-2-qualifications-and-registration-of-electors/part-5-mail-registration-and-registration-at-voter-registration-agencies/section-1-2-5025-transfer-of-voter-registration-information-to-secretary-of-state>