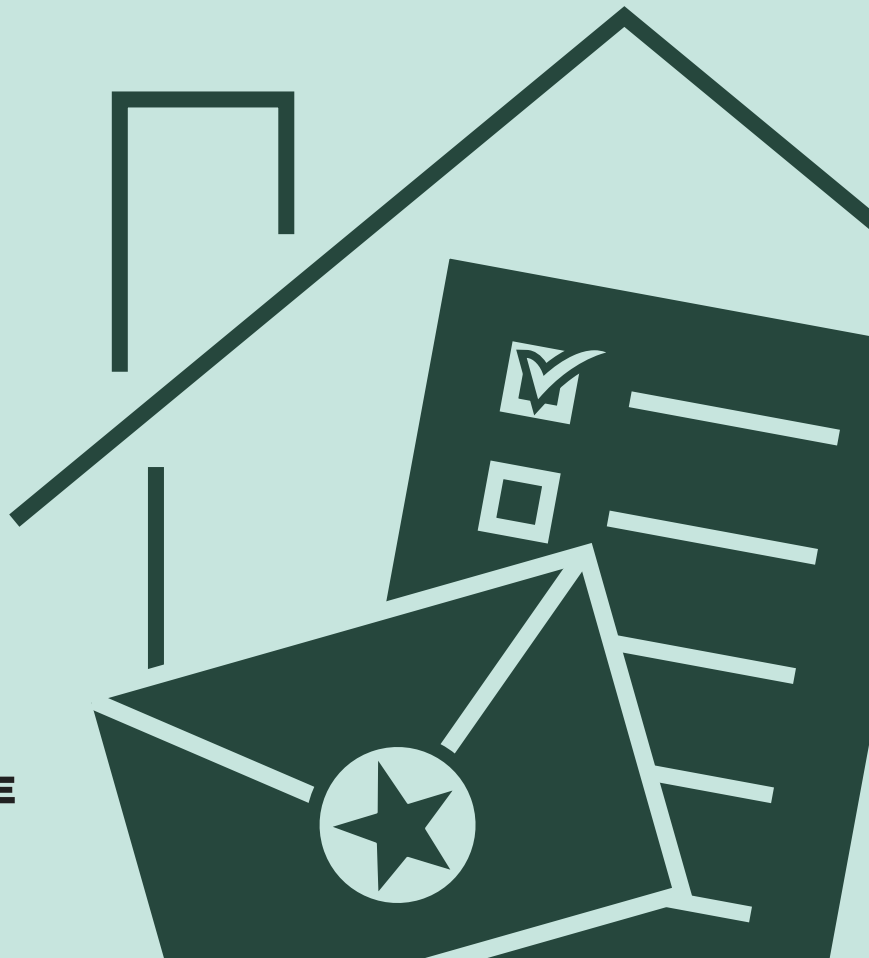


August, 2020

Vote By Mail for Secure Elections in 2020 — and Beyond

A Step-by-Step Guide for Massachusetts

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




Sightline
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VOTE  HOME

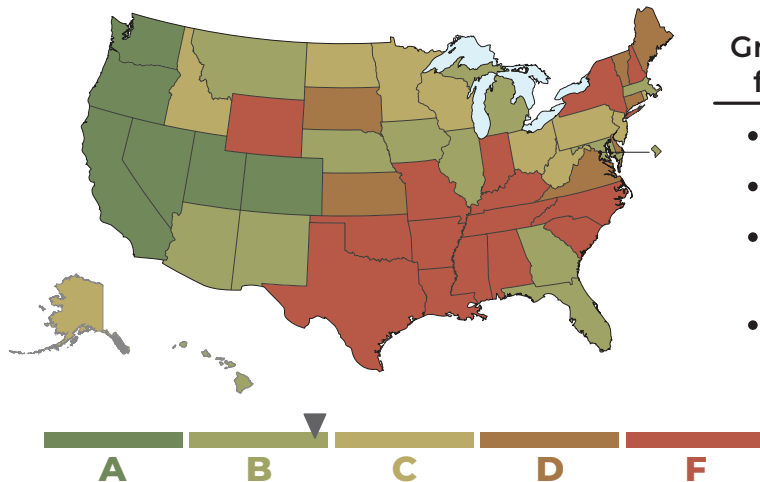
www.Sightline.org/SecureElections2020

Voting in Massachusetts



Massachusetts has more than 4.5 million registered voters in its 351 jurisdictions, ranging from 83 registered voters in Monroe to 413,000 in Boston. In the 2018 election, 3 percent of Bay Staters voted absentee. This ranged from none in many towns to nearly 50 percent in Gosnold.

Massachusetts requires voters to have a valid excuse to request to vote absentee, but it now allows any voter to request to vote early by mail without an excuse. In July 2020, lawmakers passed and the Governor signed a bill to expand early voting by mail to all voters and send all voters an application in advance of the September primary and the November general election. The new law also accepts ballots postmarked on November 3, 2020 and received by November 6, 2020.



Grades based on 15 factors covering

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

Massachusetts' grade for Vote By Mail preparedness



Ways in which Massachusetts is already prepared



- Uses voters' signatures to verify ballots.
- Gives voters sufficient opportunity to cure signature problems.
- Automatically registers voters.
- Allows clerks to start processing mailed ballots upon receipt.

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 Massachusetts 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 Massachusetts 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 Massachusetts beyond 2020.

Table of Contents

For Local Election Officials	1
1. Design ballots and envelopes that are easy to use.	1
2. Implement robust signature verification.	3
3. Provide secure drop boxes.	5
4. Consider using a professional printer and ballot sorter.	6
5. Count ballots at a secure centralized facility.	7
 For Massachusetts's Secretary of State	 9
6. Use a comprehensive system to track ballots.	9
 For Lawmakers	 12
7. Join the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC).	12
8. Account for voters with nontraditional addresses.	13
9. Give voters a "single sign-up" option.	15
10. Allow cities and towns to accept ballots postmarked on Election Day.	17
11. Allow voters to request an absentee ballot online.	19
12. Allow voters to request replacement ballots online.	20
13. Allow community organizations to collect and deliver sealed ballots.	21

For Local Election Officials

1. 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 may cause voters to fill out their ballot incorrectly or incompletely so that their vote is not counted.¹

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

Color-coded envelopes can help 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 signature or discrepancy.

Another important way to assist voters is to design and distribute voter education booklets to help guide them through the process. (For example, when Anchorage, Alaska, moved to all-mail elections in 2018, in addition to a robust [community education campaign](#) and a [voter information flyer](#), the city extended an elections call center's hours in the month leading up to the election.) To reach all voters, make all voter materials and the elections website available in multiple languages. The Brennan Center for Justice estimates that the cost for voter education materials is between [\\$0.50 and \\$0.88 per person](#).

Resources

- The Center for Civic Design's² [design guidelines for election officials](#), based on solid research and best practices (includes 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](#)

¹ 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

² 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 one in four voters have used their designs.

[instructions voters can understand](#), and [creating forms that help voters take action](#).³ Also see its guidelines for [designing voter education booklets and flyers](#), [creating accessible online information](#), and [providing materials in multiple languages](#).⁴

- Center for Tech and Civic Life’s 2020 [webinar](#) on [best practices for envelope design](#), and the [slides](#).⁵
- USPS guidance on [designing election mail](#).⁶
- Center for Tech and Civic Life’s 2020 [webinar](#) on [best practices for preparing supplementary materials](#), and the [slides](#).⁷
- CISA’s [Voter Education Guidance](#).⁸

Example Legislative Language

Revised Code of Washington [29A.40.091](#). Envelopes, declaration, and instructions—Voter’s oath—Overseas and service voters—Return of ballots—County auditor’s name.⁹

Ballots and envelopes must have the election date printed on them. Return envelopes must have space for the voter’s telephone number so that the elections office can contact the voter if their signature does not match the one on file.

Revised Code of Washington [29A.36](#). Ballots and other voting forms.¹⁰

See code for detailed guidance on formatting, contracts with vendors, sample ballots, and instructions.

Example Guidance Language

- Washington State [Ballot Format Checklist](#) 2019.¹¹
- Washington Administrative Code [434-230](#). Ballots.¹²
- Washington Administrative Code [434-230-010](#). Sample Ballots.¹³
- Colorado [Elections Division Policy and Procedure Manual](#), p. 26.¹⁴

³ <https://civicdesign.org/fieldguides>

⁴ [Ibid.](#)

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

⁶ <https://about.usps.com/election-mail/design-election-mail.htm>

⁷ <https://vimeo.com/393307242> and <https://www.techandciviclelife.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/PDF-VAH-Webinar-2-Preparing-helpful-supplementary-materials.pdf>

⁸ https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/election_education_outreach_absentee_508.pdf

⁹ <http://lawfilesext.leg.wa.gov/biennium/2019-20/Pdf/Bills/Session%20Laws/House/1520-S.SL.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=29A.36>

¹¹ <https://www.sos.wa.gov/assets/elections/administrators/2019-ballot-format-checklist.pdf>

¹² <https://apps.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=434-230>

¹³ <https://apps.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=434-230-010&pdf=true>

¹⁴ <https://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elections/policyManual/ElectionsPolicyManual.pdf#page=26>

- Oregon [Vote by Mail Procedures Manual](#), p. 23.¹⁵

2. Implement robust signature verification.

Massachusetts election officials already have experience in verifying signatures to protect against fraud while avoiding mistaken voter disenfranchisement.¹⁶ As election administrators handle more mail-in ballots due to COVID-19, officials may take several steps to implement efficient and effective signature verification.

First, digitize the voter signatures already on file. The more digitized signatures, the more accurate the verification can be.¹⁷ Signatures can come from each voter's registration, their absentee ballot request form, prior mailed ballots, or their signatures on file with the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) or other state agencies.

Second, train enough workers to inspect signatures. Washington, Oregon, and Colorado have developed training program procedures (see Resources). Forensic scientists (possibly from Massachusetts's patrol or that of a neighboring state) may be able to 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 signature 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 an initial review. Flagged ballots then go to another team of trained workers that closely examines the ballots and decides whether to accept or challenge them. (King County inspectors challenge about 1 percent of signatures.)

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

Voters' signatures change over time, so if the state does not have a recent signature on file for a voter, ask them to update it. The King County, Washington, elections administrator sends voters a Signature Update Form. And in preparation for moving to an all-mail election, Hawaii sent a postcard to all registered voters asking for an updated signature for reference.

¹⁵ https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=23

¹⁶ To verify the identity of voters who are unable to sign due to disability, offer the option of filling out a form that allows them to use a signature stamp.

¹⁷ <https://www.voteathome.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/VAH-Policy-and-Research-Guide.pdf#page=18>

Resources

- Colorado Secretary of State [Signature Verification Guide](#).¹⁸
- King County, Washington, [Signature Verification Training presentation](#) (includes examples of signatures and common problems with signatures).¹⁹
- King County, Washington, [Signature Update Form](#).²⁰
- Hawaii's Office of Elections [Signature Card](#).²¹
- Oregon Secretary of State Elections Division [webinar](#) on signature verification.²²
- Election Assistance Commission [Signature Verification Cure Process](#).²³
- [Tour](#) of King County (Washington) Elections ballot processing area.²⁴
- Oregon [Signature Stamp Attestation](#) form.²⁵
- CISA's [Ballot Verification](#) and [Signature Verification and Cure Process](#).²⁶

Example Legislative Language

Revised Code of Washington [29A.40.110](#). Processing incoming ballots.²⁷

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 Code [434-250-120](#). Verification of the signature and return date.²⁸
- Oregon [Vote by Mail Procedures Manual](#), p. 35; [Appendix 13](#), p. 83.²⁹

¹⁸ <https://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elections/docs/SignatureVerificationGuide.pdf>

¹⁹ <https://aqua.kingcounty.gov/elections/docs/vbm/VBM-information.zip> (see "Ballot processing" folder, "Signature Verification Training Updated.pptx")

²⁰ <https://aqua.kingcounty.gov/elections/docs/vbm/VBM-information.zip> (see "Ballot processing" folder, "Signature-update-letter-April-May 2016-English.pdf")

²¹ <https://elections.hawaii.gov/main/sign-sealed-and-counted-securing-your-vote>

²² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKiYGONnNT0&feature=youtu.be>

²³ https://www.eac.gov/sites/default/files/electionofficials/vbm/Signature_Verification_Cure_Process.pdf

²⁴ <https://kingcounty.gov/depts/elections/education-and-outreach/take-a-tour.aspx>

²⁵ <https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/Documents/SEL540.pdf>

²⁶ <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>

²⁷ <https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=29A.40.110>

²⁸ <https://apps.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=434-250-120>

²⁹ https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=35 and https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=83

3. Provide secure drop boxes.

In states that mail out all ballots, most voters return them to secure drop boxes, rather than via USPS. To accommodate this, cities and towns should provide enough drop boxes for all voters and make them easily accessible. Each city or town should have at least one box available 24/7; more populous cities and towns should aim to have one drop box per 10,000 voters. Drop boxes are especially important because Massachusetts requires receipt of ballots before Election Day. Voters who wish to submit their ballot after the mail cutoff date can take it to a drop box (see Recommendation 10).

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

In 2018 Oregon and Washington,³⁰ two states that mail out all ballots, had one drop box per 8,800³¹ and 10,000³² voters, respectively. King County, Washington, strategically sited its drop boxes to ensure that 95 percent of voters' addresses were within [three miles of a box](#). (However, election officials should be prepared for voters to drop off ballots in precincts and jurisdictions other than their own.) Election administrators should set up drop boxes approximately one month before elections, publicize locations on their website, and share them with local news outlets.

Cost/Savings

- Drop boxes in King County, Washington, cost \$5,235 each, and the installation of 37 drop boxes cost around \$20,000.³³
- In Pierce County, Washington, the purchase and installation of each drop box costs between \$7,000 and \$10,000.
- 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.³⁴

³⁰ <https://www.sos.wa.gov/assets/elections/ballot%20drop%20boxes%202019%20general%20election.pdf> and <https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/general-election-2019.aspx>

³¹ In 2018 Oregon had 311 drop boxes, with 165 of those boxes available 24/7.

<https://www.voteathome.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/FAQ-Best-Practices.pdf>

³² In 2018 Washington had 471 drop boxes, with 323 of those boxes available 24/7.

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

³³ <https://kingcounty.gov/~media/depts/elections/about-us/reports/bdol-expansion-plan.ashx?la=en>

³⁴ <https://wsac.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WSAC-et-al-v-State-of-Washington.pdf>

Resources

- Bipartisan Policy Center's [Logical Elections Policy](#), p. 28.³⁵
- [Mailed-out Ballot Return Choices](#), National Vote At Home Institute, 2018.³⁶
- Washington Office of the Secretary of State and Pierce and Lewis Counties' ballot drop boxes [webinar](#).³⁷
- King County [Ballot Drop Box resources](#) (details vendors, ballot collection procedures, and tier system, which is based on expected ballot volume).³⁸
- [Laserfab Vote Armor](#) (producer of heavy-duty drop boxes used in many states, including Washington and Colorado).³⁹

Example Legislative Language

Revised Code of Washington [29A.40.170](#). Ballot drop boxes.⁴⁰

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

Example Guidance Language

- Washington Secretary of State Clearinghouse Elections Notice on [Ballot Drop Boxes in All Communities](#).⁴¹
- Washington Administrative Code [434-250-100](#). Ballot deposit sites.⁴²
- Oregon [Vote by Mail Procedures Manual](#), pp. 10-15.⁴³

4. Consider using a professional printer and ballot sorter.

Many election administrators use professional printers and ballot sorters, rather than printing ballots, stuffing envelopes, and sorting them in-house. This can save money and increase staff efficiency. It might also mitigate problems voters have experienced during their primaries, such as in Georgia,⁴⁴ where voters requested ballots but did not receive

³⁵ https://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Bipartisan_Elections-Task-Force_R01_crops.pdf#page=28

³⁶ <https://www.voteathome.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Optimizing-ballot-return-choices.pdf>

³⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBRYsy9LlcU&feature=youtu.be>

³⁸ <https://aqua.kingcounty.gov/elections/docs/vbm/VBM-information.zip> (see "Ballot drop boxes" folder)

³⁹ <https://votearmor.laserfabusa.com>

⁴⁰ <https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=29A.40.170>

⁴¹ <https://www.sos.wa.gov/assets/elections/auditorsctp/17-01%20ballot%20drop%20boxes%20in%20all%20communities.pdf>

⁴² <https://apps.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=434-250-100>

⁴³ https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=10

⁴⁴ <https://www.11alive.com/article/news/politics/elections/absentee-ballot/85-4bde08c8-97db-4736-b1de-45a03c29c330>

them, or in New York,⁴⁵ where ballots did not include a return envelope. Both states were relying on overworked workers who did not have much experience in printing, stuffing, and mailing ballot envelopes, rather than hiring a professional service that has printed, stuffed, and mailed ballot envelopes many times and has quality control practices in place.

According to the Brennan Center, printing costs per ballot ranges from [\\$0.21 to \\$0.35 cents per ballot](#). Volume efficiencies in moving to a Vote By Mail system result in lower per-voter printing costs. In Colorado, total printing costs declined from [\\$6.86 to \\$3.04 per voter](#) after implementing Vote By Mail.

Resources

- [K&H Integrated Print Solutions](#) for secure ballot and envelope printing.⁴⁶
- [Runbeck Election Services](#) for election products and services.⁴⁷
- Relia-Vote™ automated mail ballot solutions from [BlueCrest](#).⁴⁸
- [Ryder Graphics](#) for ballot printing and mailing.⁴⁹
- [Reprographics](#) for ballot printing and mailing.⁵⁰
- [Phoenix Graphics](#) for ballot printing and mailing.⁵¹
- [Tritek](#) for ballot sorting and signature verification services.⁵²

Example Guidance Language

- Colorado Secretary of State [Elections Division Policy and Procedure Manual](#), p. 26.⁵³
- Oregon [Vote by Mail Procedures Manual](#), p. 23.⁵⁴

5. Count ballots at a secure centralized facility.

Especially for larger cities and towns, counting ballots in a secure centralized facility enhances election security, transparency, and efficiency. Election administrators in King County, Washington, count ballots in guarded facilities with continuous security camera monitoring in addition to using their ballot tracking system (see Recommendation 6).

⁴⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/19/us/politics/nyc-vote-by-mail.html>

⁴⁶ Many counties in the Pacific Northwest use this vendor. <http://www.khprint.com>

⁴⁷ Runbeck has the capacity to serve 10 percent of American voters. <https://runbeck.net>

⁴⁸ BlueCrest serves 30 counties. <https://www.bluecrestinc.com/solutions/vote-by-mail-relia-vote>

⁴⁹ Many Oregon counties use this vendor. <http://rydergraphics.net>

⁵⁰ Many Oregon counties use this vendor. <http://reproprinting.com>

⁵¹ Some jurisdictions on the East Coast use this vendor.

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

⁵² <https://tritektech.com>

⁵³ <https://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elections/policyManual/ElectionsPolicyManual.pdf#page=26>

⁵⁴ https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=23

Having security surveillance equipment in ballot processing areas and streaming the footage online allows voters to see for themselves how secure and transparent a jurisdiction's vote-counting procedures are. As with all election procedures, prepare for Election Day by rehearsing processes and timing various stages.

To the extent practicable, cities and towns that expect to process a high volume of early ballots by mail but don't have an appropriate facility for secure and centralized ballot processing could coordinate with cities and towns that do.

Resources

- King County Elections [FAQ](#) and [security and accountability information](#).⁵⁵
- CISA's [Inbound Ballot Process Recommendations](#).⁵⁶

Example Guidance Language

- Washington Administrative Code [434-261-045](#), Secure Storage.⁵⁷
- Oregon [Vote by Mail Procedures Manual](#), p. 8.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ <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>

⁵⁶ <https://www.in.gov/sos/elections/files/COVID-19%20Election%20GUIDANCE%20ONLY.pdf#page=43>

⁵⁷ <https://apps.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=434-261-045>

⁵⁸ https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=8

For Massachusetts's Secretary of State

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

6. 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 Scout⁵⁹ and BallotTrax,⁶⁰ uses intelligent barcodes to track every ballot and envelope, minimizing the risk of stolen ballots or ones that have been tampered with. It also increases transparency and accountability because voters can easily track when their ballot is in transit, received by election officials, and counted.

Ten states⁶¹ [require](#) tracking for absentee ballots, and 30 others⁶² have some form of ballot tracking, though not [required](#) by statute. These tracking services may not be comprehensive, however. For example, in many states, voters can look up whether their ballot has been mailed to them but may not be able to find out if it has been accepted. In contrast, Ballot Scout and BallotTrax's comprehensive services can text voters with updates on every step in their ballot's journey—when it's mailed, when it arrives at their residence, when it's in transit, and when it's been accepted. Tracking services give voters a much higher degree of confidence in the system. Such 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, Massachusetts can avoid problems such as those Wisconsin experienced in its April 2020 primary. If Wisconsin election officials had had comprehensive secure ballot tracking in place, they would have seen that thousands of mailed-out ballots had gotten stuck in mail processing centers. Getting this information would have given officials the opportunity to contact USPS and address the problem. Instead, 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, comprehensive ballot-tracking may cost around [\\$50,000](#) per

⁵⁹ <https://www.democracy.works/ballot-scout>

⁶⁰ <https://ballottrax.com>

⁶¹ California, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Iowa, Maryland, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, and Virginia require ballot tracking.

⁶² Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin have some form of ballot tracking, though it is not required.

<https://tracker.votingrightslab.org/issues/AbsenteeVoting>

year. It would be most effective for the secretary of state to enact statewide tracking, but if they do not, then local officials could step in. City or town administrators can sign up for local service, likely at a cost of a few thousand dollars per year.⁶³

Example Legislative Language

California Election Code [§ 3017 \(c\)](#). Vote by Mail Application and Voting Procedures.⁶⁴

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 website.

Florida Statutes [§ 101.62\(1\)\(c\)](#). Request for vote-by-mail ballots.⁶⁵

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 designated by the department for determining the status of their Vote By Mail ballot.

New Hampshire Revised Statutes [§ 657:26](#). Absentee Voter Website.⁶⁶

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

- Center for Tech and Civic Life's 2020 [webinar](#) on [best practices for tracking and reporting](#), and the [slides](#).⁶⁷
- USPS's [Green Tag 191](#) and ballot-specific [Service Type Identifiers \(STIDs\)](#), which uses Intelligent Mail® barcodes (IMb®), help process Vote By Mail ballots.⁶⁸

⁶³ 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>

⁶⁴ https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/codes_displayText.xhtml?lawCode=ELEC&division=3.&title=&part=&chapter=1.&article=

⁶⁵ http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&URL=0100-0199/0101/Sections/0101.62.html

⁶⁶ <http://www.gencourt.state.nh.us/rsa/html/lxiii/657/657-mrg.htm>

⁶⁷ <https://www.techandcivillife.org/vote-at-home>

⁶⁸ <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 elections office, and when it has been approved for tabulation.
- [Ballot Scout](#), a web-based ballot-tracking tool that works with USPS.⁶⁹
- [BallotTrax](#) for tracking ballots.⁷⁰

Example Guidance Language

- Oregon [Vote by Mail Procedures Manual](#), p. 26.⁷¹

⁶⁹ <https://www.democracy.works/ballot-scout>

⁷⁰ Counties in California, Oregon, and Washington use BallotTrax. <https://ballottrax.com>

⁷¹ https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=26

For Lawmakers

7. Join the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC).

As of August 2020, Massachusetts is working through the process of joining ERIC.

Thirty states and DC are members of ERIC, which helps them identify outdated or invalid voter registrations. ERIC reports to each member state which voters have moved within the state, moved out of the state, passed away, may have duplicate registrations, or may be eligible to vote but have not yet registered. States can then update addresses, remove deceased voters from the rolls, and reach out to eligible voters to encourage them to register. States that do this have more accurate voter rolls, reducing the opportunity for fraud and ensuring that ballots are mailed to eligible voters' current address.

ERIC is very effective. According to a [US GAO report](#), "King County, Washington, which conducts elections entirely by mail, saw a drop in undeliverable ballots from 17,911 in the 2013 primary to 11,174 in the 2014 primary, which county election officials attributed to Washington's participation in ERIC." In addition, member states showed a net increase of 2.36 percent in voter turnout compared to non-member states.⁷²

Resources

- ERIC's [website](#),⁷³ [bylaws](#),⁷⁴ and [procedures to join](#).⁷⁵ States pay a one-time membership fee of \$25,000 and contribute to ERIC's annual operating expenses with annual dues; states with larger populations contribute more than states with smaller ones.⁷⁶
- [Not all states](#) require changes to statutes in order to join ERIC.⁷⁷

Example Legislative Language

Connecticut General Statutes § [9-19k](#). Online voter registration system.⁷⁸

The secretary of state can use voter registration databases from other states to verify applicants' information.

⁷² https://www.rti.org/sites/default/files/resources/eric_stage1report_pewfinal_12-3-13.pdf

⁷³ <https://ericstates.org/who-we-are>

⁷⁴ https://ericstates.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/ERIC_Bylaws_01-2020.pdf

⁷⁵ <https://ericstates.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ERIC-Membership-Summary-v20190603.pdf>

⁷⁶ [Ibid.](#)

⁷⁷ <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/voter-list-accuracy.aspx>

⁷⁸ https://www.cga.ct.gov/current/pub/chap_143.htm#sec_9-19k

Nevada Revised Statutes §293.675. Establishment and maintenance of statewide voter registration list; duties of Secretary of State; requirements for list; duties of county and city clerks and Department of Motor Vehicles; verification of information with Social Security Administration; agreements with state agencies to provide information necessary for list; exchange of information with chief election officers of other states.⁷⁹

The statewide voter registration list must be shared with other states if the information will be used to maintain voter registration lists. The secretary of state can also request information from other states.

Ohio Revised Code Annotated 3503.15. Statewide voter registration database.⁸⁰

The secretary of state will enter into agreements to share voter registration data with other states as necessary to maintain registration lists. The secretary of state will ensure that this information remains confidential.

Code of Virginia §24.2-404(A)(9-10). Duties of Department of Elections.⁸¹

To maintain records, the Department of Elections may use any source of information and may share any information it receives from other agencies with any chief election officer of another state for the maintenance of voter registration systems. The statute also allows Virginia to cooperate with other states to develop systems to ensure the accuracy of voter registration rolls.

8. Account for voters with nontraditional addresses.

Native American voters living on tribal lands often have mailing addresses that don't adhere to USPS standards, 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, in an attempt to protect against fraudulent ballot requests. Or these voters may use a USPS box to receive mail but live far from the nearest post office or election center, making it more difficult to receive and return their ballot in a timely fashion.⁸² Eligible voters experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity also may not have a home address. Massachusetts should make sure these voters can receive a ballot and vote securely.

Massachusetts should allow multiple eligible voters to use the same mailing address. Living with others to save housing costs should not diminish any American's right to vote. Massachusetts can allow Native Americans to [designate a building on the Nation's land to receive their ballot](#). Especially in areas where people live far from a post office, election

⁷⁹ <https://www.leg.state.nv.us/nrs/nrs-293.html#NRS293Sec675>

⁸⁰ <http://codes.ohio.gov/orc/3503.15>

⁸¹ <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode/title24.2/chapter4/section24.2-404>

⁸² <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/22/mail-in-voting-native-americans-election>

administrators can temporarily install drop boxes or vote centers on tribal lands to ensure that voters have viable options for returning their ballots.

Massachusetts can allow homeless community members to receive their ballots at a [shelter, park, motor home](#), or other identifiable location. As an alternative, homeless voters can list the city or town elections office as their mailing address and get their ballot in person there. They can then 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.⁸³

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

Oregon Revised Statutes [247.038](#). Registration of person who is homeless or resides in identifiable location.⁸⁴

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 person's physical location or the office of the county clerk.

Revised Code of Washington [29A.08.112](#). Voters without traditional residential addresses.⁸⁵

Voter registration accepts nontraditional 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 [website](#).⁸⁶
- Colorado secretary of state [Foreclosure and Homeless Voters FAQs](#) and [Election Rules](#).⁸⁷

⁸³ https://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/info_center/laws/Title1/Title1Article2.html

⁸⁴ https://www.oregonlegislature.gov/bills_laws/ors/ors247.html

⁸⁵ <https://apps.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=29A.08.112>

⁸⁶ https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/Documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=19 and <https://sos.oregon.gov/voting/Pages/homeless-confidential.aspx>

⁸⁷ <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

- Washington Secretary of State Clearinghouse Elections Notice on [Voters without Traditional Addresses](#).⁸⁸

9. 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 to receive ballots in the mail unless they are removed from the permanent absentee voter list. These states include the five that conduct all-mail elections, plus Arizona, California, Michigan, Montana, Nevada, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania and DC. Another six states,⁸⁹ including Massachusetts, maintain a permanent absentee voter list for certain voters (usually those who are elderly and/or disabled).⁹⁰

However, 32 states require all voters to apply for an absentee ballot before 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. If these voters want to keep getting their ballot in the mail, they have to fill out paperwork again and again. This is not only a burden for the voter but also a drain on election officials who must process and enter application data every year. Giving voters the option to sign up for a permanent absentee ballot could minimize paperwork, cut costs, and save time.

The potential savings are significant. According to a [US GAO report](#), in the 2008 presidential election, Contra Costa County, 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 eightfold administrative cost increase came from handling individual ballot requests.

If the Massachusetts legislature acts quickly, it could create a “single sign-up” 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 change would save clerks and voters’ time and resources during this busy year.

⁸⁸ <https://www.sos.wa.gov/assets/elections/auditorsctp/19-04%20voters%20without%20traditional%20addresses.pdf>

⁸⁹ Kansas, Massachusetts, Missouri, New York, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.

⁹⁰ <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/absentee-and-early-voting.aspx>

Example Legislative Language

Arizona Revised Statutes [16-544](#). Permanent early voting list; civil penalty; violation; classification.⁹¹

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 their address or opt out of absentee voting. If the notice is undeliverable, the voter is removed from the permanent absentee list.

California Elections Code [3206](#). Permanent Vote by Mail Application and Procedures.⁹²

In counties that do not offer all-mail elections, 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 statewide general elections.

Montana Code Annotated [13-13-212](#). Application for absentee ballot—special provisions—absentee ballot list for subsequent elections.⁹³

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 already done so, 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.⁹⁴

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.⁹⁵

Nevada allows all voters to receive absentee ballots for all future elections. If after the request submitted the ballot is undeliverable or the voter has had their registration cancelled under [NRS 293.530](#), the elections office may not mail the absentee ballot.⁹⁶

Example Guidance Language

- Arizona Secretary of State [2019 Elections Procedures Manual](#), p. 49.⁹⁷

⁹¹ <https://www.azleg.gov/ars/16/00544.htm>

⁹² http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=ELEC§ionNum=3206

⁹³ https://leg.mt.gov/bills/mca/title_0130/chapter_0130/part_0020/section_0120/0130-0130-0020-0120.html

⁹⁴ https://nj.gov/state/dos-statutes-elections-19-60-63.shtml#ele_19_63_3

⁹⁵ <https://www.leg.state.nv.us/nrs/nrs-293.html#NRS293Sec3165>

⁹⁶ <https://www.leg.state.nv.us/nrs/nrs-293.html#NRS293Sec530>

⁹⁷ https://azsos.gov/sites/default/files/2019_ELECTIONS_PROCEDURES_MANUAL_APPROVED.pdf#page=63

10. Allow cities and towns to accept ballots postmarked on Election Day.

In 2018 approximately 5 percent of mailed-out ballots in Massachusetts were rejected. Of those, 82 percent were rejected due to late receipt. That is more than 4,200 Massachusetts voters whose votes weren't counted because they arrived too late. It's likely that more Massachusettsans will want to use absentee ballots in 2020, and a similar rejection rate for ballots received after Election Day could disenfranchise even more voters.

Thirteen states⁹⁸ 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 submit it on Election Day. It also avoids confusion because voters don't have to guess how many days it could take USPS to deliver their ballot. Allowing clerks to count ballots postmarked on Election Day and received within 10 days increases voter engagement and makes elections more representative of the people.

For November 2020 only, Massachusetts is accepting ballots postmarked by Tuesday, November 3rd (Election Day) and received by Friday, November 6th. Since this is a recent change, make this very clear to voters. In the ballot materials, instruct voters not to put their ballot in the mail any later than the Wednesday before Election Day. Run PSAs a few days before that Wednesday to remind voters of the cutoff date and that they may take their ballot to a secure drop box or a vote center up until the polls close on Election Day (see Recommendation 3).

Example Legislative Language

Alaska Statutes § [15.20.081\(e\)](#). Absentee voting in general; applying for absentee ballot by mail or electronic transmission.⁹⁹

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

⁹⁸ Alabama, Alaska, California, DC, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Texas, Washington, and West Virginia accept ballots postmarked on Election Day.

<https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/vopp-table-11-receipt-and-postmark-deadlines-for-absentee-ballots.aspx>

⁹⁹ <http://www.akleg.gov/basis/statutes.asp#15.20.081>

Illinois Compiled Statutes [10 § 5/19-8\(c\)](#). Time and place of counting ballots¹⁰⁰ and [10 § 5/18A-15](#). Validating and counting provisional ballots.¹⁰¹

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

Kansas Statute [25-1132](#). Advance voting; delivery of ballots; where; deadline for receiving ballots.¹⁰²

Absentee ballots can be received after polls close as long as they were postmarked before or on Election Day and are received within three days after the election. This second standard is not recommended, as USPS first-class standard has changed from one to three days but is now two to five days.

Nevada Revised Statutes § [293.317\(1\)\(b\), \(2\)](#). Procedure for timely returning absent ballot; treatment of absent ballot when postmark cannot be determined¹⁰³ and NRS [293.333\(2\)](#) Procedure for depositing absent ballots in ballot box; period for counting of absent ballots.¹⁰⁴

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

North Carolina General Statutes [163-231](#). Voting absentee ballots and transmitting them to the county board of elections.¹⁰⁵

Absentee ballots can be received after polls close as long as they were postmarked before or on Election Day and are received by three days after Election Day. This second standard is not recommended, as USPS first-class standard has changed from one to three days to two to five days.

Example Guidance Language

- Alaska Administrative Code [25.560](#). Timeliness of absentee by-mail ballot.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁰ <http://ilga.gov/legislation/ilcs/documents/001000050K19-8.htm>

¹⁰¹ <http://ilga.gov/legislation/ilcs/documents/001000050K18A-15.htm>

¹⁰² http://www.kslegislature.org/li/b2019_20/statute/025_000_0000_chapter/025_011_0000_article/025_011_0032_section/025_011_0032_k

¹⁰³ <https://www.leg.state.nv.us/nrs/nrs-293.html#NRS293Sec317>

¹⁰⁴ <https://www.leg.state.nv.us/nrs/nrs-293.html#NRS293Sec333>

¹⁰⁵ https://www.ncleg.net/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/HTML/ByChapter/Chapter_163.html

¹⁰⁶ <http://www.akleg.gov/basis/aac.asp#6.25.560>

11. Allow voters to request an absentee ballot online.

Thirty-nine states and DC give citizens the option to securely register to vote online.¹⁰⁷ Twenty-three states allow voters to request absentee ballots online. An additional eleven states allow voters to send their absentee ballot request via email. (Voters in these states may still face a barrier because the states require voters to print the form, physically sign it, scan it, and attach it to an email.) Allowing voters to request absentee ballots digitally makes the entire process easier for everyone, especially during times of restricted mobility like the coronavirus shutdowns. For voters, it increases their access to absentee ballot options. And for the city and town clerks and state officials, it reduces the amount of paperwork and the amount of time spent inputting data into elections systems.

Massachusetts's secretary of state could provide a user-friendly statewide 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 a replacement ballot. For example, Texas offers a simple online request form¹⁰⁸ and Idaho offers a complete online portal.¹⁰⁹

Creating a secure online request system requires some upfront investment in digital infrastructure. Election administrators will need to integrate the new interface into their existing elections software.

Example Legislative Language

Florida 2019 Statutes [101.62](#). Request for vote-by-mail ballots.¹¹⁰

Election supervisors must inform voters requesting Vote By Mail ballots of a free access system to determine the ballot status.

Code of Virginia § [24.2-711.1](#). Absentee ballots; confirmation of receipt; notice of reason for rejection.¹¹¹

The secretary of state must implement a free access system for voters to track absentee applications and ballots.

¹⁰⁷ <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/electronic-or-online-voter-registration.aspx#a>

¹⁰⁸ <https://webservices.sos.state.tx.us/vrrequest/bbm.asp>

¹⁰⁹ <https://idahovotes.gov/vote-early-idaho>

¹¹⁰ http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&URL=0100-0199/0101/Sections/0101.62.html

¹¹¹ <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode/title24.2/chapter7/section24.2-711.1>

12. 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 the pandemic, city and town clerks can give voters the option to request a replacement ballot not only in person but also 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 6). Each voter will only be able to vote once; if an 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 and \$2.35. Massachusetts 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 7).

Example Legislative Language

Oregon Revised Statutes § [254.470 \(7\)](#). Procedures for conducting election by mail; rules.¹¹²

Voters may obtain replacement ballots if the ballot is destroyed, lost, spoiled, or not received. Replacement ballots need not be mailed if within five days of Election Day. Instead, they will be available at the office of the county clerk.

Revised Codes of Washington [29A.40.070](#). Date ballots mailed—Replacement ballots.¹¹³

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

Example Guidance Language

- Oregon [Vote by Mail Procedures Manual](#), p. 51.¹¹⁴
- Alaska Division of Elections instructions for [online ballot delivery](#).¹¹⁵
- Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State [2016 Absentee Voting Administration Guide](#), p. 30.¹¹⁶

¹¹² https://www.oregonlegislature.gov/bills_laws/ors/ors254.html

¹¹³ <https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=29A.40.070>

¹¹⁴ https://sos.oregon.gov/elections/documents/vbm_manual.pdf#page=51

¹¹⁵ <http://www.elections.alaska.gov/Core/votingbyonline.php>

¹¹⁶ <http://www.co.wadena.mn.us/DocumentCenter/View/904/absentee-voting-administration-guide#page=30>

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

Twenty states¹¹⁷ allow anyone to deliver another voter's sealed and signed ballot. By allowing community organizations to help deliver sealed and signed ballots, Massachusetts can increase voter turnout and help further enfranchise voters who face barriers to voting. This policy can help voters who lack access to a vehicle or who do not have access to consistent mail service.¹¹⁸

Ballot tracking and robust signature verification can prevent would-be ballot harvesters from collecting blank ballots and completing them. Fraudsters can't access voters' signature files, and voters who haven't received their ballots will notice if the tracking system reports their ballot as delivered and returned. Working with get-out-the-vote organizers who collect ballots from rural reservations and transport them to election offices is often the only way Native Americans can vote.¹¹⁹

Example Legislative Language:

Oregon Revised Statutes [254.470 \(6\)\(d\)](#). Procedures for conducting election by mail.¹²⁰

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

¹¹⁷ California, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Kansas, Maine, Montana, Nebraska, New York, North Dakota, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Vermont, Washington, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

¹¹⁸ <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/01/27/arizona-ballot-harvesting-law-discriminates-minority-voters-ninth-circuit/4589610002>

¹¹⁹ <https://www.narf.org/montana-bipa/>

¹²⁰ <https://www.oregonlaws.org/ors/254.470>