



# ABSENTEE VOTING AND VOTE BY MAIL

October 2007

*Quick Start*  
MANAGEMENT GUIDE



ABSENTEE VOTING AND VOTE BY MAIL

*The Quick Start Management Guide for Absentee Voting and Vote by Mail is part of a series of brochures designed to highlight and summarize the information contained in the chapters of the U.S. Election Assistance Commission's (EAC) Election Management Guidelines (EMG). The goal of the EMG is to provide a collection of election management guidelines, consolidated into one document, to assist State and local election officials effectively manage and administer elections. These guidelines are solely designed to serve as a source of information for election officials and not as requirements by which they must abide. The EAC expects the EMG to be completed in 2008. However, due to the urgent need for election management resources, EMG chapters and Quick Starts are released as they are completed.*

*The content of the EMG and the Quick Start Management Guides has been developed in collaboration with State and local election officials and other election professionals who have first-hand experience managing elections. The EAC is grateful for their participation and ensuring the guidelines are practical and applicable for jurisdictions regardless of their size and resources. The EMG and the Quick Starts are available online at [www.eac.gov](http://www.eac.gov).*



## INTRODUCTION

- Please note that this guide is designed to cover general processes and procedures regarding absentee voting/vote by mail. Laws and procedures regarding absentee voting/vote by mail vary by state (*i.e. eligibility requirements, deadlines, processing, etc.*)
- In most states, absentee voting requires a voter to make a formal request for an absentee ballot; the election office then processes the application and mails the ballot to the voter; the voter receives and casts his or her ballot per the established procedures; and the election office then processes the returned ballot to determine its validity and, if valid, tabulates the vote into the official vote tally.
- A separate Quick Start Management Guide has been designed to discuss matters regarding absentee voting by uniformed and overseas military voters more in depth.

## BALLOT PREPARATION AND MAILING

- Review all of the deadlines relating to preparation and distribution of ballots. Prepare a timeline detailing each activity in chronological order, including staff assignments and completion date.



**TIP:** Highlight in **BOLD** any dates mandated by Federal or State law. Examples include, but are not limited to:

- Last day to register to voter and/or update voter registration information.
  - Date that the ballot file should be sent to the printer.
  - Date that printed ballots should be delivered by the printer.
  - Date that military/overseas ballots must be mailed.
  - Date to mail out-of-state ballots.
  - Date to mail in-state ballots.
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- Determine how many ballots to print by reviewing State law and the history of voter turnout for a similar election. Develop “Plan B” for how to respond to a ballot shortage. For example:
    - Will you utilize ballot on demand printers?
    - Do you have an action plan in place with your ballot printer?
  - Review outgoing and return ballot envelopes to determine ways to incorporate the use of technology to improve staff efficiencies and implement voter user-friendly techniques, while ensuring that all statutory requirements are met.
    - Consider using envelope printers to print voter data directly onto each envelope instead of using labels.

- Print envelopes in ballot order instead of alphabetical by voter name for ease of use and accuracy for pulling ballots and stuffing the envelopes.
- Incorporate the use of bar codes on the ballot envelopes for ease in receiving return envelopes and updating voter history.
- If State law requires the voter to sign the return ballot envelope, consider incorporating a tear-off flap to cover the voter's signature.
- Refer to State law to determine the need of a third secrecy envelope. Consider using a "blue lining" on the return ballot envelope.  
**TIP:** *Develop internal policies and procedures requiring that the ballots be opened in steps by different teams to ensure privacy of the voted ballot instead of using a secrecy envelope.*
- Consider paying for "business reply" postage. When undeliverable envelopes are returned, they can be opened and the unused ballot recycled.
- Review State law and local budgetary rules when evaluating whether to pay return postage for all absentee by mail ballots. **TIP:** *If not paying return postage, be sure to note the amount of postage required on the return ballot envelope.*
- Partner with your area post office to utilize the official election postal logo on all outgoing and incoming ballot envelopes. Coordinate the design of the envelopes, placement of the wording, etc. with the postal authorities and request their written approval.
- Consider establishing a specific P.O. Box number for returned ballot envelopes.  
**TIP:** *Establish separate P.O. Box numbers for voter*



*registration applications, absentee applications, etc. to speed the sorting of incoming mail.*

- Evaluate the area designated for pulling and stuffing ballots to determine space needs in order to develop an efficient work flow. Implement the policy of working in teams of two to ensure accuracy. Staff assignments should include individuals designated as ballot pullers and ballot stuffers. Be sure to implement “two person” integrity and separation of duties throughout the process.
- If using an external mailing/distribution center for ballot mailing, it is recommended that election staff be on-site at all times.
- Maintain a daily listing of all individuals who have been mailed a ballot. Follow State law regarding public/candidate access to this information.
- Track numbers of ballots issued by quantity and ballot style on a daily basis. Use this information to monitor ballot stock usage and availability.

## BALLOT RECEPTION

- Consider investing in postal tracking software to track the envelopes through the postal facilities and to confirm the delivery of individual ballot envelopes to the postal carriers. This same tracking software can track the route of the return ballot envelope.
- Coordinate with the post office on how you wish to receive the returned ballots. Will you schedule a special delivery from the post office? Will you have

staff members pick up the ballots from the post office? **TIP:** *Always work in teams of two when receiving returned ballot envelopes. At no time should any one person be alone with the voted ballot envelopes.*

- Determine if you will provide off-site collection/drop off receptacles for returned ballot envelopes. Establish procedures for securing and monitoring these locations.
- Develop and post general rules for individuals wishing to observe the ballot reception process. For example:
  - Ask everyone observing the process to turn off or silence their cell phones.
  - Observers must visibly wear identifying name tags/badges at all times.
- Develop training manuals and conduct training sessions for all temporary staff assigned to the ballot reception operation. Maintain record of all staff involved in ballot reception by keeping a daily sign in/out sheet. **TIP:** *Require that all ballot reception staff take lunch breaks at the same time, ensuring that the ballot reception area is locked down and secured during that time period.*
- Date and time stamp each return ballot envelope. Implement daily logs (computerized or by hand) to account for all returned ballot envelopes. These logs must be balanced on a daily basis to actual ballot envelopes on hand.
- Update the voter record to indicate that the ballot envelope has been returned. Confirm the voter's



name and address. If required, verify the voter's signature on the envelope. **TIP:** *Provide specialized staff training on signature verification. Consider implementing the “check it three times” policy for questionable signatures: first check is conducted by regular staff; second check is conducted by more experienced staff; and third check is conducted by the county canvass board. When a signature is first questioned, consider sending a letter to the voter notifying them that their signature is being questioned.*

- Separate and log any ballot envelopes that are challenged. Continue to balance all receiving logs to total ballot envelopes received on a daily basis.

## BALLOT TABULATION

- Develop procedures for managing exceptions during the ballot opening process. Examples include: “No ballot in the envelope”; “Too many ballots in the envelope”; or “Ballot from a wrong election in the envelope”. **TIP:** *Before storing ballot envelopes, recheck that all envelopes are empty.*
- Follow State law and uniform administrative guidelines when determining voter intent. Establish procedures for managing physically damaged ballots, ballots that are marked in such a fashion that they will not be read by the scanner, and write-in votes.
- Establish written procedures for manual duplication of voted ballots. Assign a number to the original ballot and that same number to the duplicate ballot. Work in teams of two to duplicate each



ballot. Maintain a log indicating the assigned number, ballot style, and reason for duplication. Require that the two person duplication team initial the ballot log for auditing purposes.

- Count the number of ballots sent to the scanner and balance with the scanner on a regular basis. Consider batching the ballots in bundles and assign batch numbers to each bundle to ensure that all ballots have been read by the scanner.
- When tabulation is completed, balance the total number of envelopes received, minus exceptions to the total number of voted ballots scanned.

## STORAGE AND SECURITY CONSIDERATIONS

- Install appropriate security in areas where ballots are stored (*i.e. alarms, locks, cameras, etc.*).
- Enforce the two-person rule anytime ballots are handled. Maintain a listing of employees who are authorized to access the ballot area. Establish an access log to include access date, employee name(s), and reason for access.
- Store the empty return envelopes and voted ballots in separate tamper-evident sealed containers.

## VOTER EDUCATION

- Publish advertisements in newspapers, area neighborhood association newsletters, city/chamber/school district newsletters, church



publications, multilingual media publications, etc. reminding voters to update any change to their voter registration information (*i.e. name change, address change, party affiliation change, and signature update*). **TIP:** *Partner with your State Office to develop a statewide media blitz.*

- Create an informational brochure with instructions on how to vote absentee by mail. Include a copy of the vote by mail ballot application form as a “tear off return mail page” on the brochure. Make these brochures readily available in your community by distributing them at community events and diverse locations (*i.e. city hall, libraries, schools, registration drives, etc.*) **TIP:** *Be sure to include information about all aspects of voting by mail, including, but not limited to, how to request a replacement ballot and how to qualify to become a “permanent” vote by mail voter, if permitted by State law.*
- Post information about absentee vote by mail procedures on your jurisdiction’s Web site. Information on all deadlines should be posted along with dates that voters can expect the ballots to be mailed. If voted ballots must be received in your office by a certain date, be sure to include that date in **BOLD**. If possible, include a downloadable copy of the vote by mail ballot application form, if required. **TIP:** *Consider including a link that allows the voter to confirm their voter registration status on your Web site. If their information needs to be updated, provide another link to a voter registration form, allowing the voter to manage their own updates at their convenience.*

- Provide information to high schools, community colleges, and universities. Partner with these learning institutions to distribute voter registration and absentee voting instructions with enrollment packets. Encourage them to communicate Election Day deadlines for voter registration and absentee voting through the use of e-mail, podcasting, and text messaging.

- Encourage candidates to provide information to voters about how to vote absentee by mail.

**TIP:** *Provide a scripted handout to all candidates and encourage them to use it for all campaign literature to ensure consistency in all printed material.*

- Distribute absentee voting procedures to special interest groups: nursing homes, assisted living centers, hospitals, military installations, etc.
- Provide copies of the Vote by Mail Ballot Application forms to post offices, supermarkets, churches, etc.
- Utilize brochures, flyers, and your jurisdiction's Web site to inform voters how to ensure their ballot is counted. Provide answers to "frequently asked questions" such as:
  - May I drop my voted absentee ballot at the polls on Election Day?
  - Will my ballot be counted if I mail it **ON** Election Day?
  - I made a mistake while voting my ballot – How do I get a new ballot?



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